

Nieman

IT'S  
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~~BETTER~~  
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COMPLICATED

LESSONS  
FROM THE  
PANDEMIC

PUBLISHER  
Ann Marie Lipinski

EDITOR  
James Geary

SENIOR EDITOR  
Laura Colarusso

ASSISTANT EDITOR  
Natalie De Rosa

DESIGN  
Dan Zedek

EDITORIAL OFFICES  
One Francis Avenue, Cambridge,  
MA 02138-2098, 617-496-6308,  
[nreditor@harvard.edu](mailto:nreditor@harvard.edu)

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## Contributors

**Sofia Cerda Campero** is a Mexican-American journalist and translator. Her work mostly focuses on the intersections of gender, race, culture, and the Latinx diaspora. She's also co-host and producer of "Remotas," a Spanish-language podcast about Mexican womanhood.

**Clio Chang** is a writer based in New York covering politics, culture, and media. Her work can be found at The New Republic, The California Sunday Magazine, Jezebel, and more. Her biggest accomplishment to date is a profile of a dog.

**Celeste Katz Marston** has spent 25 years reporting for newspapers, magazines, and radio with a specialty in politics, elections, and voting rights, and has been on staff at outlets including the New York Daily News, Newsweek, and WBAI New York.

**John Archibald**, a 2021 Nieman Fellow, is a Pulitzer Prize winner and columnist for the Alabama Media Group.

**Jacqui Banaszynski** is editor at Nieman Storyboard and a faculty fellow at the Poynter Institute. She won the 1988 Pulitzer Prize in feature writing for "AIDS in the Heartland," a series about a gay farm couple facing AIDS, and was a finalist for the 1986 Pulitzer in international reporting for her account of the sub-Saharan famine.

**Deb Pastner** is director of photo and video at the Star Tribune.

**Mattia Ferraresi**, a 2019 Nieman Fellow, is the

managing editor for Italy's Domani newspaper.

**Lisa Lerer**, is a national political correspondent for the New York Times and 2018 Nieman Fellow.

**Austin Bogues**, a 2021 Nieman Fellow at Harvard University, most recently covered Asbury Park and Neptune Township as well as race relations for the Asbury Park Press, part of the USA Today Network in New Jersey.

**Kyle Edwards**, a 2021 Nieman Visiting Fellow, is managing editor at Native News Online.

**Brett Anderson**, a 2013 Nieman Fellow, is a food writer for The New York Times.

**Maureen O'Donnell** became the Chicago Sun-Times' obituary writer in 2009. Before joining the Sun-Times, she was a criminal courts reporter for the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, an associate editor at Adweek magazine, and a reporter and editor at the City News Bureau of Chicago.

**Shira Springer** has been a sports journalist for more than 20 years. While at The Boston Globe, she served as the Boston Celtics beat writer. She currently writes columns on women in sports for the Sports Business Journal and teaches journalism full time at Boston University.

**Kathleen McNerney** is a freelance journalist in Boston. She led local education coverage for Boston's NPR News Station,

WBUR, and spent over a decade working as an audio producer and reporter in the Boston area.

**Laura Colarusso** is Nieman Reports' senior editor. Previously, she was the digital managing editor at GBH News and a member of The Boston Globe's editorial board.

**Issac Bailey**, a 2014 Nieman Fellow, is the author of "Why Didn't We Riot? A Black Man in Trumpland" (Other Press, October 2020) and "My Brother Moochie: Regaining Dignity in the Face of Crime, Poverty, and Racism in the American South" (Other Press, 2018). He has contributed to Politico, CNN.com, Time, and The Washington Post.

**Elizaveta Kuznetsova** is a fellow at Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard University. She holds a PhD in international relations from City University of London. She specializes in public diplomacy, propaganda, and Russian foreign policy.

**Ann Cooper** was a 2020 Joan Shorenstein Fellow at Harvard Kennedy School's Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy. She served as executive director of the Committee to Protect Journalists from 1998 until June 2006.

**Chelsea Cirruzzo** is a health reporter for U.S. News & World Report. She's been published in a number of outlets, including The Washington Post, The Lily, DCist, Washington City Paper, Wired, and others.



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## Futuro Media Group's Maria Hinojosa: "It Was Out of Frustration that Futuro Was Built"

The pioneering journalist on covering Latinx communities, integrating BIPOC narratives into the mainstream, and covering immigration with depth and nuance

**J**ournalist, entrepreneur, and 2020 I.F. Stone Award winner Maria Hinojosa has focused on issues facing historically marginalized communities throughout her three decades in the field. In 1992, she launched *Latino USA*, one of the earliest public radio programs to focus on Latinx stories, which she still hosts in addition to taking on duties as executive producer in 2000. In 2010, she founded the independent non-profit Futuro Media Group which "explores and gives critical voice to the diversity of the American experience." Apart from producing *Latino USA*, the multi-platform operation hosts a number of successful projects including: *Latino Rebels*, *Suave*, *America by the Numbers*, *In the Thick*, and more.

Hinojosa's recently published book *"Once I Was You: A Memoir of Love and Hate in a Torn America,"* uses major turning points in recent American and Latin American history as a vehicle to reflect on her life as a journalist, immigrant, daughter, partner, mother, Mexicana, and more. Hinojosa, who is based in Harlem, spoke with the Nieman Foundation in March about Futuro Media Group, her memoir, immigration coverage, the integration of BIPOC narratives into mainstream news, and more. Edited excerpts:

### On the origins of Futuro Media, and recognizing the need for a different news lens

One of the most important moments for me was when I got the U.S. Census data from 2000 that showed that the Latino population in the U.S. — not including

migrants — had experienced 43% growth.

I don't know if that was immediate, but as they released the numbers and everything became crystal clear, I was like, "Wow, wait, there's such a huge audience." That stuck with me in terms of what the future really looks like, seriously, in terms of audience.

At that time, I was at CNN. I was still at NPR. The question, 'What audience are we leaving on the floor there?' was very much in the back of my mind. It was out of frustration that Futuro was built.

It was when I was told by my dear "60 Minutes," and they were like, "We love you. Come back when one of these old white guys gets sick or dies." I got on the subway of 59th Street and cried all the way to Harlem. I didn't want to go back to working for other people.

Something came into like, "Okay, well, you've had people say, 'Create something.' You've learned how to raise money." Best thing that I learned after leaving CNN. And I just went for it.

It was terrifying. I had everybody



**The question, 'What audience are we leaving on the floor there?' was very much in the back of my mind**

criticizing me. They were like, "Latino USA, it's a radio show. Who cares? Audio is dead. Why are you focusing from a POC point of view? Who cares? Nobody's going to fund that. Why are you making it a nonprofit instead of for profit? Make money, Maria. Use your name."

My best example of the fruition of all of this work which is riddled with self doubt, as I deal with in "Once I Was You," all the imposter syndrome, is what we dropped this last month, which is "Suave," the podcast. I meet Suave in 1993 and I start recording him.

Now we have a podcast that is almost 30 years in the making about a journalist and his source, who happened to have been sentenced to life in prison without parole.

By the way, it's going super well at Futuro.

### On the complexity of Latinx stories, and the media's failure to capture it

Here's the problem that we have right now, is that from being invisible ... even though it was the 1980s when Time magazine declared it "the decade of the Hispanic." Then, in [2001], a Time magazine cover was [Amexica], like [a combination of] America and Mexico.

We had this visibility, [with celebrities like] JLo, Ricky Martin, but we were still essentially invisible. Now what we have is a hypervisibility that is false.

I think writ large, it is simply a lack of understanding of depth, difference, complexity. Now, Latinos and Latinas have to disprove that we are all at the border. That we all cross the border by jumping the wall. That we are all gang members. That we are all "anchor babies." That we are all migrant workers or poultry workers. That we are coming here to take "your jobs." All of those things, that has happened with the help of our colleagues. We, journalists like me and journalists of conscience, and allies, have to now deconstruct that.

### On immigration coverage in mainstream media

All of you, my dear colleagues, were raised consuming the mainstream media. As was I. The mainstream media has been, for the last 60 years, let's say, been really unable to cover immigration.

The first televised refugee crisis we have in our country is the Vietnamese people. How do our colleagues manage that? Our colleagues of The New York Times and of CBS News labeled them "boat people" and used that term.



For Maria Hinojosa, changing the narrative about Latinx people requires deconstructing those already created by journalists

In order to break the way that we're talking about this particular crisis, you have to really deconstruct. We see how long it's taking in terms of the Black Lives Matter movement and pushing for this kind of conversation in newsrooms.

Now we have to take it and just be like, "OK, now you got to deconstruct everything you think and know about immigrants." Can we, as journalists, accept and apologize for using the term "boat people?"

That would be like our colleagues right now, from CNN, or from The New York Times, to go down and look at the people, the refugees, sleeping on the sidewalks in Matamoros [in Tamaulipas, Mexico], and say they are "concrete people."

That's why we have to have these conversations amongst journalists, so that we can lovingly say to them, "Bro, sis, you got to deconstruct this to understand."

### On the narrative of Latinx people in the U.S. becoming more positive

Absolutely it's going to change. I'm so sure of it. What happened in 2020, in terms of the participation of Latino and Latina voters was like, even though it was

not front and center of the news, we're watching it.

Let me tell you, it could have gone south. Latino/Latina voters could have said, "Forget about it." They didn't. The more complex part about it was how many voted for Trump. The Latino/Latina Trump reality is real. On the other hand, who's one of the most exciting politicians that you actually want to see what she's doing? [Rep.] Alexandria Ocasio Cortez.

She's going to run for president. We know it. That energy that is going to bring a generation of young Latinos ... What we fail to understand and what our colleagues fail to understand is that Latinos and Latinas are going to drive population growth along with Asian-Americans.

CNN did just name its new anchors. Three Latino up and coming journalists are creating space. That is what the future looks like.

I think that is why Latino USA continues ... to grow because we're doing this deep reporting.

### On integrating BIPOC stories into mainstream media coverage

I don't have the answer. I'm thinking,

for example, in some ways, the "Suave" podcast is a piece that is very Latino-centric. In some ways, the "Suave" story is hyperlocal, related to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania prisons, juvenile lifers. On the other hand, it's just like a really deep human story.

My colleague, Julio Ricardo Varela, is a contributor at NBC Latino. I think it's a platform that is really important. NBC Black, NBC Asian, I actually think those are really important platforms. They should exist. The point is that if the home page is not understanding the complexity ... they're not practicing their best journalism.

This is why it's, in some ways, easier to be independent, because the riskier moves that you take, the buck falls on you. Whereas when you're in corporate media, the buck falls on a lot of people, and so people may not take the risks that they need to take.

That may mean simply from this very structural racist perspective, which is, "Well, do I put these on the front page or not? Is it going to do well?" I'm like, what is your responsibility as a journalist? ■

## Telling Young People about the Realities of War

Rania Abouzeid, a 2020 Nieman Fellow, on adapting her book on the Syrian Civil War for a young audience through “Sisters of the War”

I’d never thought about writing for teenagers. The subject matter of my work doesn’t exactly lend itself to a young audience — or so I assumed. In my two decades of covering the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia, I’ve focused on conflicts, human rights abuses, political upheaval, women’s rights (or the lack of), and other difficult issues. And so, when an editor at Scholastic asked me if I’d consider adapting my first book, “No Turning Back: Life, Loss, and Hope in Wartime Syria,” for a young adult audience, my initial reaction was to say no.

The Syrian conflict is devastating and complicated. It is often difficult for adults to understand, let alone young people. Now a decade old, the war has claimed at least 500,000 lives and displaced half of the country’s population of 23 million. The figures are numbing, but every statistic is a person, every person a member of a family, every family integral to a community, every community part of a country.



Syrian boxer Ahmed Dwara transformed a government building destroyed by a bombing in the countryside of Aleppo, northern Syria, into a hall to train a group of youth and children in boxing

I wanted to focus on those factors, but how to do it for a young audience? I thought back to the time when I was in school and some of the books I’d read and been assigned. Those which stuck with me into adulthood showed me the horrors of war through the lived experiences of children. And I remembered that there is a way to tell difficult stories to young people without talking down to or traumatizing them.

“Sisters of the War: Two Remarkable True Stories of Survival and Hope in Syria,” was published in September 2020. It tells the stories of two sets of sisters who find themselves on opposite sides of the war. The sisters appear in “No Turning Back,” but their stories are afforded more space, depth, and background in the adaptation. Some of the language is simplified and terms such as Al-Qaeda, socialism, and

9/11 are explained rather than assumed knowledge. An epilogue also updates readers on where the girls are now.

I knew from the outset that I wanted the protagonists to be about the same age as the readers because I didn’t want young people to feel lectured to by an adult. It is not often enough we see war through the eyes of children, but it’s a critical perspective.

The story is dark in places but teenage readers will also hopefully come away from the story uplifted and inspired.

It’s a story set in Syria, but it also transcends borders. At a time of great division, when differences are magnified and feared, and refugees and foreigners are demonized by some, the stories of these girls will hopefully remind readers that young people everywhere are not so very different. ■

## Holding On to Hope that News Coverage Leads to Change

Jasmine Brown, a 2020 Nieman Fellow and a 2021 Nieman Visiting Fellow, on maintaining her faith in journalism through the struggles of the past year

One of my primary beliefs as a journalist is that I work to shed light on the darkness. It’s a credo many of us in this field hold close to our hearts. It keeps us moving as we expose seemingly insurmountable systems of inequality,

crack open foundations of racism, and aim to show some of the good in this world.

The last year has shaken my faith in journalism to its core.

June 1, 2020, was my first day back to work after completing the Nieman

Fellowship. It was a Monday and the past several days had seen the pandemic and the murder of George Floyd open old wounds of racial disparity, pouring out in protest in streets across America.

It was far from my dream of a smooth return to my job as a producer at ABC News’ “Nightline.” Instead, I was working remotely from my studio apartment in Cambridge, staring head on at the project I’d taken the past nine months to study — implicit bias in instances of police misconduct and the ways in which news coverage, cell phone videos, and police

## Empowering Incarcerated People to Tell Their Own Stories

Shaheen Pasha, a 2018 Knight Visiting Nieman Fellow, on starting the Prison Journalism Project and training incarcerated writers to tell stories about their prison community

The first thing I noticed was the dirty plexiglass as I entered the visiting room of the New Jersey State Prison in 2005. My best friend had just been sentenced to 150 years behind bars and I was still in a state of shock and grief at the verdict. As I waited for him to arrive, I realized that the glass wouldn’t be the only thing separating us.

For the first time in our friendship, I knew nothing about what life was like for him. As a young reporter back then, I covered court cases regularly. I never thought about the fact that life went on behind prison walls, that there was a whole community filled with stories that were untapped and hidden.

“Everyone in here has a story to tell,” he told me during that visit.

Over the next decade, I realized that those stories would continue to go untold if journalism didn’t amplify them.

In 2019, my partner, Yukari Iwatani



Shaheen Pasha, co-founder of the Prison Journalism Project, working with PJP editorial associate Marcus Henderson in 2018

Kane, and I, launched the Prison Journalism Project, conceived as an educational initiative to teach incarcerated people the tools of journalism to tell their own stories with nuance. It was the vision I had as a 2018 Knight Visiting Nieman.

The U.S. has about 5% of the world’s population, but it has 25% of the global prison population. That’s the population of a small country, yet there is virtually no reporting from within. Almost every story that is written about mass incarceration comes from outside writers with limited access to daily prison life.

The Prison Journalism Project aims to change that. Our goal is to create the first national network of prison journalists who can work with mainstream media to report on life behind bars.

To do that, education and publishing must go hand in hand. We are creating a correspondence-based journalism

curriculum, called PJP J-School, and the first of its kind journalism textbook specifically for prison reporters to give them initial training in journalism practices. We also launched an online newsroom and became a member of the Institute for Nonprofit News to give our writers a launching pad to get their stories noticed.

Since its launch in April 2020, the PJP has published more than 600 stories by over 250 writers across 28 states and Canada. Our writers have been published in prominent publications such as The Washington Post and The Marshall Project.

It’s a solid beginning and one that I couldn’t have imagined in the early days of my Knight Nieman Fellowship as I built the foundation for the Prison Journalism Project. There is still much work to be done but our writers tell us that the ability to report their experiences has broken down some of the walls around them. ■

body cameras illuminate how routine encounters can turn deadly. As the demonstrations swelled, I realized I had finished my time at Nieman with more questions than answers.

In the midst of moving back to New York, I took on projects that looked at race and policing — from our correspondents talking about living as Black men in America to a data-driven look at how often Black Americans are stopped by police and the dangers they encounter.

In the fall, I became a senior producer in the race and culture unit at ABC News’

“World News Tonight with David Muir.” I’d long been hesitant about moving into a leadership role in the newsroom, but I finally felt ready. I wanted to make an impact on diversity and representation.

What I’ve learned over the past seven months is that covering race day in and day out in America means wrestling with despair. But finding hope when you are covering the worst of actions by your fellow men has proven difficult.

Since the start of the pandemic and the death of George Floyd, our nation has seen a rise in hate crimes against Asians

and Asian-Americans, the storming of the U.S. Capitol by insurrectionists, and the continuation of fatal police encounters for Black and brown people.

I cannot help but wonder if through highlighting the issues, we are making matters worse. Are we emboldening bad actors to carry out their hatred? They say the darkest hour is just before dawn, but how can we be certain that daylight is near?

I have to believe that news coverage leads to change. I am holding on to hope in the midst of despair. ■

ABOVE LEFT: MUHAMMAD AL-RIFAI/NURPHOTO VIA AP  
ABOVE RIGHT: COURTESY OF THE PRISON JOURNALISM PROJECT

# MAKING LATINX COMMUNITIES VISIBLE IN LOCAL NEWS

**From more established outlets to startups, these newsrooms are bringing nuanced, in-depth coverage to the issues impacting Latinx people**

**BY SOFIA GERDA CAMPERO**



**‘C** **AN STAR PLAYER MARCO FABIÁN** revive the Union’s Latino fan base? Show me some cariño (affection), they say.”

That was the headline for an April 2019 Spanish-language multimedia feature in The Philadelphia Inquirer about Mexican soccer player Marco Fabián, star of the Philadelphia

Union team, which over the previous nine years had dropped most of its Hispanic players.

In the piece, Inquirer staffer Jesenia De Moya Correa unpacks, through interviews with several Spanish-speaking sources of different ages and nationalities, what having a Mexican player on the Philadelphia squad means to the city’s Latinx communities.

It wasn’t the first time the Inquirer had covered Fabián or the local league. However, it was the first time that the story was told through voices from the community.

**PREVIOUS:** Adolfo Martinez, founder of Los Angeles-based taquería El Taurino. His restaurant was profiled by L.A. TACO in May 2021

**BELOW:** Anthony Velázquez poses for the first ever editorial from Emperifollá, “At Abuela’s House,” published in 2019

“To have a reporter there among them, chatting and debating about the future of the league, was really moving for them,” De Moya Correa says of her interviews.

For Latinx news consumers, that’s been an all too rare experience — and one that a growing number of independent outlets are determined to change.

There are over 60 million Latinxs in the United States, comprising 18.5% of the population. (Latinx is a panethnic label that embraces the fluidity of these communities, which is why the term is used in this piece.) While many Latinxs share a language, religion, and many aspects of culture, the group is not monolithic. Yet news outlets have often been blind to this diversity, most notably during last November’s presidential election when many anchors, analysts, and commentators were shocked to learn that large percentages of Latinxs in Texas and Florida had supported Donald Trump.

“The main problem with mainstream media is that they’ve always imagined that they served everyone when they actually served an audience that was mainly white, middle-class, and with a certain level of education,” says Graciela Mochkofsky, director of the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism’s Spanish-language program and the Center for Community Media at CUNY, who has long emphasized the importance of Latinx representation in the media. “There has only been one community that has been fully represented or served by these outlets, who were under the fantasy that they were serving everyone.” Mochkofsky points out that Spanish-media newsrooms tend to focus on an older generation of Latinxs, when the second- and third-generation experience — the experience of the children and grandchildren of first-generation immigrants who may not even speak Spanish — is just as important.

There is a growing ecosystem of newsrooms serving these audiences. Futuro Media Group, an independent nonprofit producing multimedia journalism; “Radio Ambulante,” a Spanish-language podcast; Remezcla, which brings visibility to Latinx culture; palabra., an NAHJ initiative that covers stories of communities that have been disregarded; and Puerto Rico-based Centro de Periodismo Investigativo, with investigative journalism at its core.

Joining these more established outlets is a cohort of newsrooms exploring how the current polarized political climate and the tragedies that have unfolded over the past four years — from Hurricane Maria to the El Paso shooting to the Covid-19 pandemic — are impacting Latinx communities.

## EL INQUIRER

**A**t the Inquirer, De Moya Correa had been hired to develop a content strategy to reach the city’s large Spanish-speaking population. Her piece on Marco Fabián was the first of her work to be published in Spanish, and it was a catalyst for the founding of El Inquirer, a repository for Spanish-language coverage and translations of Inquirer stories of relevance to Latinx readers.

Historically, the Inquirer’s relationship with the city’s Latinx communities has been rocky. With a newsroom that is 74% white, the Inquirer dedicated only 3.4% of its coverage to Latinx communities, the fastest-growing demographic in the United States after Asian-Americans. In Philadelphia, the Latinx population nearly doubled between 2000 and 2018, from 8.5% to 14.5%. Puerto Ricans or people of Puerto Rican origin are the largest group, but Philadelphia is also home to a large number of Mexicans,

PREVIOUS PAGE: VLADIMIR SANTOS/COURTESY OF L.A. TACO  
LEFT: MARIDELIS MORALES ROSADO/COURTESY OF EMPERIFOLLÁ



ABOVE: AMIR AZIZ/COURTESY OF EL TÍMPANO AND THE OAKLANDSIDE

Dominicans, Cubans, and Venezuelans, among other Latin American groups.

De Moya Correa’s job was to improve the Inquirer’s coverage of and relationship with Latinx communities. The problem, however, was that there was no relationship with them to begin with.

“The environment was incredibly hostile,” says De Moya Correa, who was born in New York to Dominican immigrants. Reporting in the field, potential sources would ask her, “Who are you working for?” When she replied she was with The Philadelphia Inquirer, people ignored her or even asked her to leave their streets. “You only come here to report on crime or scandal,” De Moya Correa says a block organizer once told her.

De Moya Correa has persisted, though, sending emails and WhatsApp messages to community leaders, people from religious institutions, council members, activists, and teachers who could guide her to the topics the Inquirer needed to cover. That effort is starting to pay off, with El Inquirer slowly getting the support of members of the Latinx communities.

“The newspaper is finally giving validation to these communities in their own language,” says De Moya Correa. “However, it’s been up to us to build somewhat of a communication strategy so people can find out about our work.” The next step for the paper is to do original reporting specifically for El Inquirer and develop coverage strategies for the entire newsroom.

## EMPERIFOLLÁ

**E**mperifollá is an outlet that since its founding in 2019 has covered the influence of Afro and Indigenous communities on culture, fashion, and beauty, Andean culture in fashion, and the lack of Black Latinx representation in the media.

In “This Is What Latinx Media Could Actually Look Like,” Puerto Rican founder Frances Solá-Santiago tackles the “#VogueChallenge,” a social media initiative that invited users to post their own versions of a Vogue cover. “More than a creative challenge, it’s a chance to highlight Black, Indigenous, Asian, Latinx, and other races and ethnicities around the world who’ve been historically overlooked by fashion and beauty magazines,” she wrote.

The piece speaks to the reckoning over diversity in fashion while emphasizing that media employees from racialized communities have often been overlooked and mistreated, as evidenced by the spate of resignations during the summer of 2020 of top editors from outlets like Bon Appetit, Refinery29, and The Philadelphia Inquirer over racist behaviors and discrimination against employees of color. The lack of diversity “has influence over Latinx communities and media,” says Solá-Santiago. “This affects marginalized groups and reinforces Eurocentric beauty standards. At Emperifollá, our premise is that fashion and beauty are inherently political. It’s our responsibility to look into the nuances

Marina Salas was featured in a story by El Tímpano and The Oaklandside about Covid-19’s financial impact on undocumented immigrants

of the communities we aim to represent and serve.”

To be *emperifollá* or *emperifollada* means to be well dressed and groomed, to look decorated. The term is popularly used across Latin America but resonates deeply in Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic. Solá-Santiago got the idea for the site after reading “The Joy of Always Being *Emperifollá*,” a 2018 personal essay by Laia García-Furtado that explores the author’s relationship with fashion and the women who raised her.

Solá-Santiago was reminded of her grandmother, mother, and aunts putting on their powder and lipstick, always looking *emperifollá* as a way of highlighting their presence and power. She started a Twitter thread to explore what other people had to say about *emperifollá*. The result was a site to cater to a Latinx millennial audience.

The first issue, in March 2019, “At Abuela’s House,” analyzed different elements of many Latinx millennials’ grandmothers’ houses and the experiences around it: red lipstick, hot coffee, Maria biscuits, dominoes, and hand mirrors — an ode to their culture and the women who raised them. “We were taking the collective imagery of our upbringing to question what it says about us,” says Solá-Santiago. “This was something very different from other Latinx fashion and beauty coverage that tends to be centered around stereotypes such as the

## EL TÍMPANO

For the past two years El Tímpano, a Spanish-language text-messaging service and reporting lab in Oakland, California, has delivered news by creating a loop between journalists and their Spanish-speaking audiences. Residents share their problems and concerns with journalists; journalists share their findings through an SMS platform. The community dictates the kind of news it needs.

Founder and Oakland native Madeleine Bair noticed a crucial aspect that was missing in the city’s local media when she returned to her hometown in 2017: Latinx voices. “This year has been primarily focused on Covid because our audience has been the most impacted by it,” she says. “The most relevant information, such as renter protection or where to get tested, isn’t always available in Spanish on the channels and tools that they use.”

For instance, El Tímpano sent out a message asking how Covid-19 has affected people’s personal finances. Among the many responses was one from a man who had lost his job due to the pandemic and didn’t qualify for government aid. He asked how he could access financial help to pay his rent, and El Tímpano answered his question, providing him with the resources he needed. El Tímpano is responsive to user feedback, too. When a woman mentioned that El Tímpano always referred people to numbers that often don’t pick up, the outlet started providing other resources that were more easily accessible.

Bair, who is fluent in Spanish, grounded her startup in extensive research. She reached out to community leaders — church pastors, educators, advocates, people who worked with Oakland’s Latinx immigrant communities — and held workshops as well as surveying some 300 residents. “Latinos are the largest growing group in the city, and yet if you didn’t live or work in East Oakland, you had no way of knowing this because the voices and narratives of Latino immigrants are nearly invisible in local media,” says Bair. People of Latinx or Hispanic origin make up 26.5% of Oakland’s population. Spanish is the most common non-English language, spoken by 21.8% of the population.

Bair found that most people were either getting their news from Univision and Telemundo, the major Spanish-language media outlets, or local radio stations that covered the entire Bay Area. She also found that many residents were getting information from grassroots organizations, provided during meetings, while many others avoided the news altogether. Bair says many felt the news only painted them as victims or covered their communities when something bad happened: “This doesn’t mean they want feel-good news, but news that can help them take action.”

With funding from California Humanities, El Tímpano collaborated with local artist Ivan López to create a microphone sculpture. It was set up in different neighborhoods throughout East Oakland, and street

“THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE IS TO MAKE INDEPENDENT MEDIA SOMETHING SUSTAINABLE”

CRISTINA DEL MAR QUILES, TODAS

‘spicy Latinas.’ My generation is more about self-expression and gender fluidity. We understand that a Latina is not necessarily a curvy heterosexual woman.”

“At Abuela’s House” features drag queen Vena Cava, the stage name for Puerto Rican creative Anthony Velázquez, and Afro-Latina model Anastasia Lovera wearing abuela-like clothing by Latinx designers: polka dots, golden earrings and rings, saint medallions, and shiny tunics. The goal: to juxtapose old-school behaviors with a new inclusive moment. “It was a reflection of our own experiences, remembering the afternoons we spent at our grandmother’s house,” says Solá-Santiago. “This house celebrates racial diversity and gender fluidity, which is why we picked those models. The audience perceived this straight away and saw themselves reflected in the pictures and the story they told.”

Six months after launch, *Emperifollá* began getting invitations to participate in events and panels, reaching a predominantly female English-speaking audience aged between 18 and 35. At the moment, close to 7,000 viewers consume *Emperifollá*’s content every month. In September 2019, *O, The Oprah Magazine* featured it as one of the 10 Latina-owned businesses to support.



vendors, construction workers, newly arrived immigrants, and other residents were invited to share stories about the rise in rents and other housing issues. In alliance with El Tecolote, an advocacy journalism newspaper in San Francisco, El Tímpano published some of these stories, in which people talked about being forced to move due to eviction, living in extremely poor sanitary conditions, and the increasing crime rate in their neighborhoods.

Since last spring, the pandemic has been the most crucial issue affecting the communities El Tímpano serves. Most recently, the team collaborated with The Oaklandside to report on how the local public health system is too overwhelmed to follow up with sick residents, a topic that came from audience questions.

“It’s important to note that as El Tímpano has developed a relationship of trust and reciprocity with our SMS community, community members are increasingly sending questions to us that are not directly in response to the messages we send out,” says Bair.

El Tímpano has received funding through grants, including The Lenfest Institute and The California Wellness Foundation. Revenues also include government funding to provide census information and public

health information. In November, El Tímpano reached 1,200 people.

## L.A. TACO

Last February, Javier Cabral, a Los Angeles native, a Mexican-American born to immigrant parents, and editor since 2019 of the James Beard award-winning platform L.A. Taco, published a story about Andres Santos, an *elotero*, a person who prepares corn at a food stand. Santos had worked in Highland Park for 23 years but, in response to the effects of gentrification, decided to go back to his native Mexico. The story, threading in entire sentences in Spanish and highlighting the popular expression *ya estuvo* (“I’ve had it”) is an example of how food can be used as a vehicle to bring visibility to the narratives of Mexican-Americans in Los Angeles.

“He is humbled, exhausted, and fatigued after getting up at 5 AM and single-handedly shucking and slicing the kernels off 500 ears of corn. He prepped up until 3 PM for his very last day of service,” wrote Cabral, describing the intensive labor, long hours, and hazards experienced by many immigrants in the informal workforce.

A workshop with a grassroots organization of Latina immigrants was one way El Tímpano involved community members in its journalism

There are close to 10,000 food vendors in Los Angeles, many of whom are undocumented and identify as Latinx. Over the past eight years, the average cost of a house in Highland Park has more than doubled, from \$352,055 to \$797,250. Once a predominantly Latinx neighborhood, Highland Park has seen gentrification impact residents as well as the workers who cater to specific communities. In this case, the non-Latinx newcomers to the neighborhood did not share the same interest in Santos' corn, eventually forcing him to give up his business.

"I was born and raised here," says Cabral. "I've seen firsthand how my city is changing. I think the biggest topic is development, gentrification, and homelessness. So, we find ways of telling these stories in a unique way." Almost half of the population in Los Angeles is Latinx or of Latinx origin.

Among other topics, L.A. Taco shines a light on the inequality and economic disparities that the Latinx Los Angeles workforce faces. The outlet has also focused on addressing activism and racial injustice, working alongside Black voices and promoting unity among communities. In November, the site published "To Sheriff Villanueva," which explores the #AdiosVillanueva campaign addressing the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department's response to the killing of Andres

form has survived on donations from readers, who in exchange receive discounts and perks at restaurants that partner with L.A. Taco. However, the platform's financial situation is far from what is needed to produce content or maintain staff. As Cabral puts it, L.A. Taco doesn't make money, it "grinds by."

## TODAS

**T**odas was founded in the midst of a crisis. In 2017, Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico, leaving over 10,000 residents jobless, including investigative journalist Cristina del Mar Quiles.

For some time, Quiles had been thinking about starting a feminist outlet to fill a gap in the Puerto Rican media landscape. In December of 2017, only three months after Hurricane Maria, Quiles and a handful of collaborators launched Todas.

The project, a labor of love from a team who all have side jobs, brings the voices of women and nonbinary folks and the issues that affect them to the Puerto Rican social and political landscape, focusing on stories of individual and collective fights in culture, politics, environmental issues, and sexuality. "Anything can be looked at through a gender-equality lens," says Quiles. "For example, pension cuts are traditionally understood as something that mostly affects men, but this is untrue. Women are carrying all of this on their shoulders."

In July 2020, Todas published a piece that explains how pension cuts have affected women who support their families. Written by collaborator Némesis Mora Pérez, the story unpacks how female heads of families, who also have to tend to their children and grandchildren, are suffering the cuts by threading personal narratives with an up-close look at the short- and long-term effects of pension legislation.

Other issues covered by Todas include increasing rates of femicides and domestic violence. A piece by contributor Adriana Díaz Tirado explains how La Red de Albergues de Violencia Doméstica en Puerto Rico, shelters for women who have faced domestic abuse, are saving lives during lockdown. This service-journalism piece spotlights the gender violence that has been happening during the coronavirus pandemic. It provides a list of contacts and shelters to which women who are at risk can turn.

The platform continues to grow but is still in search of a revenue model. "The biggest challenge is to make independent media something sustainable," says Quiles.

## "¿QUÉ PASA, MIDWEST?"

**"¿Q**ué Pasa, Midwest?" is the first bilingual podcast from the Public Broadcasting Station WNIN in Evansville, Indiana. Since 2016, it has been telling personal stories that af-



ANA MARÍA ABRUÑA REYES/COURTESY OF TODAS PR

fect Latinx communities in the Midwest, tackling topics such as Latinxs in the electoral process, music and identity, the challenges of healthcare, and crossing the border. Hosts and interviewees merge English and Spanish in an attempt to bring inclusion and foster education among different groups.

The project began while Paola Mazizán, founder and producer of ¿QPM?, was an intern at WNIN and noticed the lack of content directed to Latinx communities in the Midwest. From 2010 to 2019, the Midwest saw an 18% growth in its Latinx population.

Mazizán made the case to Steven Burger, vice president of the station. With the support of grants from the likes of the Google Podcasts program from PRX, the station decided to try a podcast that would allow the target audience, many of whom are low-income factory and farm workers working long hours or even night shifts, to listen during their own time.

Episode 13 of season one, "Searching for Identidad," unpacks an identity crisis by telling the story of Amy's grandfather who, due to an abusive childhood in Mexicali, left the country as a young adult and enrolled in the U.S. military. Once in the U.S., people started assuming that he was Italian, an identity that he embraced through a friend. He never

corrected them and for years Amy thought this was true.

"I want to learn Spanish. I want to learn to cook Mexican food and all of those things. Is that okay with you?" Amy asks her grandfather during the 10-minute episode. "If you have to do that, do it," her grandfather replies, "but you have your own other background, don't forget it, that we need to have the white part of it."

This story debunks a common narrative in which immigrants always keep traditions and customs with pride, longing for their homeland. "My grandfather fell in love with this country via the military and then became a police officer, places where whiteness really does mean something special," says Amy.

"They ignore us as a region," says Mareea Thomas, co-producer of ¿QPM?, who is African-American, of mainstream news coverage of people of color in the Midwest. "They talk about California, Texas, New York, the coasts, and here people dip their toes in the water but they're not really going into the communities and figuring out what people really think."

Reporters at ¿QPM? and similar outlets around the country are starting to change that by elevating the stories of Latinx communities. ■

**An anti-police violence vigil in Loíza, P.R., on June 1, 2020, in memory of victims including George Floyd and Adolfinia Villanueva, a Black woman killed by police at the site in 1980**

## "EL TÍMPANO HAS DEVELOPED A RELATIONSHIP OF TRUST AND RECIPROCITY WITH OUR SMS COMMUNITY"

MADLINE BAIR, EL TÍMPANO

Guardado, an 18-year-old Salvadoran who was shot by the police while working as a security guard. Since 2000, 53% of police fatalities were identified by the Los Angeles County Medical Examiner-Coroner as "Latino."

Making a call for compassion and empathy for affected families, this piece gathers letters from activists from Black and Latinx communities who share their experiences of trauma at the hands of law enforcement on behalf of their sons. The letters speak to the systematic racism, impunity, lack of accountability and grief families are subjected to every day.

"With the politicization of their deaths often follows the dehumanization of their lives," wrote contributor Juliana Clark. "Too quickly, the public can forget that these men were once as real and vibrant out in the world as we all are."

Once a Mexican territory, Los Angeles is in many ways culturally Mexican or Chicano, a chosen form of identity of Mexican-Americans. "Tacos are necesidad," says Cabral, "L.A. is the city of tacos. Regardless of your income, everyone eats them and loves them. We celebrate the taco lifestyle."

For the past couple of years, the independent plat-





**OF THE  
COMMUNITY,  
BY THE  
COMMUNITY,  
FOR THE  
COMMUNITY**

How the pandemic and BLM protests starkly illustrated the need for community and immigrant-serving media outlets

BY CLIO CHANG

**IN MARCH, WHEN A MAN SHOT AND KILLED EIGHT PEOPLE**, including six women of Asian descent, across three different spas in Atlanta, Georgia, one thing quickly became clear: the mainstream press wasn't equipped to cover the news in the way that the local Korean press was.

Atlanta K, a small local Korean-language outlet run by Sang Yeon Lee, broke the news overnight that at least two of those killed were ethnic Koreans. Eventually, it was revealed that four of the women — Hyun-Jung Grant, Yong-Ae Yue, Sun-Cha Kim, and Soon-Chung Park — were spa workers of Korean descent. Much of the fuller reporting about the victims, including statements from their friends and families, originated from outlets like Lee's, which were closely connected to and well sourced within the affected communities.

"Some readers told me that they didn't trust the mainstream media, and some were disappointed by the way they were reporting," Lee says, pointing to other outlets' preoccupation with the spa industry, rather than focusing on the lives of the women themselves. But still, Lee says he helped national news reporters with the information he had and especially appreciated outlets that employed Korean-American journalists who reached out for his opinion to better understand the context of the tragedy.

While the coverage in Atlanta starkly illustrated the need for community and immigrant-serving media outlets like Atlanta K, this sector — which includes a huge range, from companies like Telemundo to smaller outlets serving specific local communities — has long been vital. These outlets often report in languages other than English and serve local communities of color in ways that mainstream outlets are unable to. This has become especially clear during the pandemic, which has seen not only a global health crisis that disproportionately affects minority and immigrant communities, but also massive anti-police brutality protests, growing instances of anti-Asian violence, and undocumented workers who are left out of Covid relief efforts.

The term most often used for this sector is "ethnic media," but this framework can also unintentionally other or stigmatize publications that are as central as more mainstream, white-led outlets. CUNY's Center for Community Media, for example, has dropped the word "ethnic" from its title. In this piece, the outlets referred to serve communities of color and immigrant communities.

Often thought of as alternative to mainstream news — despite the fact that millions of people depend on these outlets — publications serving minority and immigrant communities have spent the past year getting

vital information out about Covid testing, vaccine distribution, and relief money to people on the ground.

"We have Filipino publications really focusing on how Filipino health care workers were disproportionately affected by pandemic; Vietnamese outlets were able to write stories about how the nail salons are reacting to policy changes in the reopening," says Chi Zhang, a researcher who authored a recent survey of outlets in California for University of California, Riverside. "And last year, during the George Floyd protests, a lot of these publications were able to utilize the connections they had with local individuals and businesses and community leaders to really produce stories that are just not covered by mainstream media."

Given the lasting impact of the coronavirus pandemic and the continuing struggles for racial justice, not to mention America's changing demographics, publications serving minority and immigrant communities are likely to become even more integral to growing populations that rely on such publications to combat misinformation and report stories that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Lee, who has been working as a reporter at Korean-language news outlets in the United States for the past two decades, branched out on his own in 2019 to start Atlanta K, a digital-only outlet. While there were many

PREVIOUS SPREAD: CHANG W. LEE/THE NEW YORK TIMES  
ABOVE RIGHT: MABEL JIMENEZ/COURTESY OF EL TECOLOTE



printed Korean news sources, he felt that there wasn't enough online-focused news for the local Korean community. Soon after Lee started the publication, the pandemic hit. Since then, Atlanta K has covered essential issues, such as providing information on local vaccine distribution and debunking Covid-19 conspiracies and misinformation.

Lee notes how Atlanta K reports with more context for its audience than other outlets, like the fact that pro-Trump conspiracies are popular among the Korean community.

"Mainstream media doesn't understand that," Lee says. "They think the Asian community is all pro-Democrat, that they are all friendly to things like vaccines and face masks. But it's not true because there are pro-Republican, pro-Trump people living here. I understand those kinds of things, so I can help fight against it."

While the outlet lost ad revenue during the start of the pandemic last year, Lee says it has been easier for a digital publication like Atlanta K to financially weather the pandemic than print outlets. Lee says that Atlanta K is actually growing from local advertising and that he's looking to hire a second-generation Korean journalist to write for the site in English.

The same can't be said for the sector overall, which, like the media industry as a whole, has been hit hard

over the past year. Zhang surveyed community media outlets in California from April to May 2020, finding that the pandemic wiped out half of the sector's revenue in the state, with a quarter of outlets reporting a revenue loss of more than 70 percent. While audiences grew during the pandemic for nearly half of the surveyed outlets — reflecting their importance for readers — this didn't necessarily translate into advertising revenue, which is how the majority of these outlets make money.

And yet it's those same communities that have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic.

"Communities that have been hardest hit by the pandemic are probably not the communities reading the mainstream outlets. These are immigrant communities, brown and Black communities, that have been decimated," says Daniela Gerson, assistant professor of journalism at California State University, Northridge, who authored a recent report highlighting how outlets are managing to sustain themselves during the pandemic.

For this sector, these kinds of financial challenges are not new; 28 percent of the California outlets surveyed were operating at a loss even before the pandemic. According to Gerson, in addition to facing the same types of business model challenges as mainstream media overall, over the past few decades, community and immigrant-serving outlets have also had to deal with

**Lourdes Rojas, volunteer for the Latino Task Force Against Covid-19, canvasses businesses on Mission Street to provide information about upcoming free Covid-19 testing in the neighborhood**

**PREVIOUS SPREAD: Two people light a candle at a makeshift memorial outside Gold Spa in Atlanta, March 18, 2021, where three women of Asian descent were killed**

competition from home-country news sites, which can now be read online, as well as social media serving as a way for people to get service-oriented news.

“An old challenge and big issue for community media, and media particularly serving communities of color and immigrant communities, has been access to capital,” Graciela Mochofsky, executive director of CUNY’s CCM, says. “Both in the commercial advertising world and also now grant funding and platform funding.”

While the sector is incredibly varied, for many community and immigrant-serving outlets that were relying on advertising from small local businesses and event-based revenue, the pandemic cut into already-tight budgets. Alexis Terrazas, editor-in-chief of El Tecolote, a 50-year-old paper serving the Latino community in San Francisco’s Mission district, says that last year the paper lost the steady revenue from running a bingo game every week.

Similarly, Anh Do, a Los Angeles Times reporter and board member of Nguoi Viet News, a Vietnamese newspaper started by her father, says they had to pause events at the community center attached to the paper’s headquarters in Orange County, California. “It was a space that the community is comfortable and familiar with,” Do says of the auditorium the outlet rented out for all kinds of events, from health fairs to recruiting workshops. “While the revenue that Nguoi Viet pulled in from it wasn’t huge, it was very steady, very reliable, and it was a way that the newspaper expanded its reach.” Because of that lost revenue, along with steep cuts in print advertising, the paper laid off around 15 people out of its 100-person staff during the pandemic.

Garry Pierre-Pierre, editor of The Haitian Times, a now digital-only paper based in Brooklyn, New York, serving the Haitian diaspora, also saw a rash of cancellations when Covid hit from the event-based advertisers on which the publication relied.

“Events just dried up overnight, for obvious reasons. So, I’m thinking, that’s it. I’m going to shut the site. There’s no way we can continue,” Pierre-Pierre says.

But the paper actually saw growth in revenue, traffic, and subscribers, which Pierre-Pierre credited to a New York City executive order that recently went into effect, mandating that at least 50 percent of the city’s print and online advertising would go to community media outlets.

“Overnight we went from thinking we’re going to close the shop to expanding the shop,” Pierre-Pierre says.

This is just one example of how local governments can play a role in helping sustain some of the country’s most vital media outlets, which, like the media sector as a whole as some have argued, will need to see an increase in public funding overall. The executive order was advocated for by the CCM, which now helps connect city agencies with the publishers who will get the advertisements — from Covid vaccine locations to census information — to the communities they’re trying to reach.

A CCM white paper published in 2013 found that while community and immigrant-facing publications had a circulation rate that reached 55 percent of the

city’s population, they were only receiving 18 percent of the city’s ad budget.

“In many cases it was the most marginalized communities, either because of linguistic barriers or socioeconomic barriers, and mostly immigrant communities and communities of color,” Mochofsky says.

Mochofsky points out that it’s a win-win situation for city governments and community media outlets, with the CCM now trying to get similar legislation passed in other states and cities, like California and Chicago.

“The city needs to engage with residents, and we talk to the residents,” as Pierre-Pierre puts it. “That’s always been the case.”

It’s been undeniable during the pandemic that community and immigrant-facing media outlets have provided a kind of service reporting that’s been essential in getting information to people who need it. Outlets like Sahan Journal, a non-profit dedicated to reporting for immigrants and communities of color in Minneapolis, have been on the ground providing crucial reporting on the George Floyd protests and the Derek Chauvin verdict year round, from the perspective of reporters of color. And then there are the publications providing in-language reporting on platforms where their audiences already are, whether it’s posting on messaging apps WeChat and KaKao or using video or audio for audiences that might face linguistic barriers.

One such outlet is Radio Indígena, a project that came out of the non-profit Mixteco that organizes indigenous farmworkers in southern California. The radio station, which started in 2014 as online-only and now includes an FM station after raising \$20,000 through a community fundraising drive, reaches some of the people with the least access to information because it reports in indigenous languages like Mixteco and Zapoteco as well as Spanish.

Since Covid hit a year ago last March, Arcenio López, executive director of the non-profit, says Radio Indígena has been translating CDC information into these languages, explaining how to download Zoom, and how to apply for the housing and food assistance programs that are available for its undocumented audiences. While the audience numbers are difficult to quantify, López estimates that they get around 4,000 daily listeners on their FM station and thousands more through online platforms like Facebook Live.

López says he knew the station was getting essential information out when one of its organizers tried to provide Covid vaccine outreach to farmworkers and asked for authorization from a workplace supervisor to enter the field. The organizer was denied entry when the employer found out they were associated with Radio Indígena.

“The supervisor said, ‘No, we cannot allow you to go in because you’re providing so much information about workers’ rights,’” López recalls, laughing. “I was not mad. That’s actually really good proof for me that we’re doing a good job.”

During the pandemic, El Tecolote’s Terrazas realized their Spanish-language coverage wasn’t going to reach all of the indigenous Mayan community. So, they

recruited a Mayan food industry worker to interview a health worker at a vaccine distribution site.

“That video went really far within our Mayan community,” Terrazas says. “There’s this narrative of vaccine hesitancy that’s out there, but we also found that a lot of folks, especially frontline food workers, were like, ‘No, I’m going to get the vaccine,’ and it encouraged and showed these Mayan folks how to get it.”

Despite continuous financial and visibility challenges, many community and immigrant-facing outlets are finding ways to survive and grow even now. Outlets that have been able to embrace the shift to digital platforms have done especially well, according to California State University’s Gerson.

Last summer, “working on that report, I was thinking it could be pretty dark,” says Gerson, referring to her research on commercial survival strategies during the pandemic. “There are a lot of reasons immigrant-serving media outlets are facing challenges that go beyond local media outlets. But I also found there were really exciting ways that immigrant-serving outlets were growing and innovating and there are lessons for the media as a whole.”

The report found, for example, that outlets that are using social media platforms to develop community engagement and diversifying their business streams beyond a reliance on print ads are faring especially well.

One of the other main lessons: Cultivating a relationship with the audience.

While traditional media outlets are facing a crisis

in trust, experts and publishers agree that community-based media outlets are not seeing the same problem.

“Most of the community media outlets, because they were community-based and really made by people in the community they serve, that wasn’t an issue,” says CUNY’s Mochofsky. “Everyone saw this enormous spike in traffic and in readership because in a crisis, that’s where people turn.”

Yet that growth doesn’t necessarily translate into revenue, especially when advertisers from bigger companies often overlook community media outlets. And even for publications that follow a non-profit model, like Radio Indígena, there’s always the issue of sustainability. The pandemic has shown funders the greater need for such outlets — especially as an informational tool in the time of social distancing and mis- and disinformation — but López says it’s still a precarious endeavor: “Radio was hard to sustain before the pandemic, let’s put it that way. We don’t know what to expect tomorrow.”

Such media outlets, like the communities they serve, can’t just depend on visibility during a crisis; that’s why ad initiatives like the program in New York City can serve as an essential part of public infrastructure.

“There are still a lot of changes that need to be done in terms of recognizing the importance of these outlets, especially of smaller-sized media like ours,” López says. “We only see things for us when we are in a crisis or a pandemic moment. I think this is just another call for this kind of government funding.” ■

**The Haitian Times covered a Black Lives Matter march in New York City following the April 20, 2021, conviction of former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin for the murder of George Floyd**



LEONARDO MARCHI/COURTESY OF THE HAITIAN TIMES

**“WE ONLY SEE THINGS FOR US WHEN WE ARE IN A CRISIS OR PANDEMIC MOMENT”**

ALEXIS TERRAZAS  
EDITOR, EL TECOLOTE



**“AS EXHAUSTING  
A BEAT AS IT  
IS IMPORTANT”**

Reporters who have long covered the far right offer advice — and warnings — for where reporting on white nationalism and conspiracy theories should go from here

**BY CELESTE KATZ MARSTON**

# S

eward Darby's book on women in the white nationalist movement, "Sisters in Hate," grew out of a detailed piece of reporting she published in Harper's in 2017. But that wasn't the first place she shopped the story — and she still remembers the way another outlet greeted the pitch.

"Their reply really bugged me, because it [felt like], 'You don't even really need to do much reporting. [Just] find some quotes online and throw together an article basically highlighting how weird this is,'" recalls Darby, who's also editor of The Atavist Magazine. "At that point, I already saw how poor some of the coverage was of this space and how much of it treated it [as] kind of this 'crazy thing that's happening right now,' as opposed to something that spoke to broader trends in American society. I felt like it was asking me to take [a] stance of dismissiveness."

Just months after Darby's book came out in July 2020, an insurrectionist mob stormed the U.S. Capitol to try to thwart certification of Joe Biden's victory over Donald Trump in the 2020 presidential election. At least five people died because of the riots; four police officers subsequently committed suicide.

Dismissiveness isn't a tenable stance when it comes to covering white nationalism, conspiracy theories, hate speech, and other forms of extremism. The storming of the Capitol centers what reporters on the far-right beat have been saying for years: America, and its media, need to take this threat seriously.

The question is, how to do so without amplifying misinformation or normalizing extremist ideologies.

Many were shocked by the violence of Jan. 6. Many who have long covered the far right, white nationalism, and conspiracy theories were decidedly not.

"These groups were underestimated for way too long," says Melissa Gira Grant, a staff writer for The New Republic who has written extensively about the far right. "And part of the way they were underestimated is, we just thought that's not who we were ... Who would

fly a Confederate flag in the Capitol? ... That's the thing that's sort of shifted; [what] people will understand as 'possible' is just different now."

Extremists have been dismissed and their threat minimized by portrayals as lonely basement-dwellers spouting impotent hatred in chat rooms. They have coded their violent intent in goofy cartoon imagery and flowery clothes. Some news outlets initially avoided or limited coverage of militant groups for fear of giving them oxygen to flourish. At times, efforts to expose malignant forces have backfired, either because those forces were normalized or quasi-glamorized or because the people who wrote about them unintentionally ended up being vectors for publicity and even recruitment.

Reporters who covered extremism, white nationalism, conspiracy, and militant activity before Jan. 6 have



**PREVIOUS SPREAD:** The United States Capitol Building in Washington, D.C. was breached by thousands of Trump supporters during a "Stop the Steal" riot on Jan. 6, 2021

PREVIOUS SPREAD: STAR MAXUPIX VIA AP

ANDREW CABALLERO-REYNOLDS/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

some advice, warnings, and outstanding questions about where reporting goes from here.

### LEARNING THE LESSONS OF THE LAST WAR

**W**hen it comes to the political animus that started swirling around former President Donald Trump when he was still a candidate, Evan Osnos, a staff writer for The New Yorker based in Washington, notes there were precursors. Trump "was the culmination of decades of decisions in economics and politics and media," Osnos says. As a reporter, he saw some of this for himself on the campaign trail and flagged it. Scarcely two months after Trump declared his candidacy, Osnos had a New Yorker piece not-

ing the reality TV star's appeal to white nationalists; the story quoted a web developer praising a Trump debate performance while "sipping coffee from a cup adorned with a swastika."

Now, Osnos senses that outlets are less inclined to pull punches for fear of being seen as partisan. "It's not a big-D Democratic thing to say that [Missouri Republican Senator] Josh Hawley provided essential support, ideologically and rhetorically, to the events that unfolded on Jan. 6 — full stop. [That's] a statement of fact," he says. "I sometimes think of journalism practices [as] learning the lessons of the last war, always."

Coverage of Hawley, Osnos says, can underscore "the lessons of the early Trump era when people were more or less assuming that Trump was either temporary [or] not a serious political element." A younger genera-

**A member of the Ku Klux Klan shouts at counter protesters during the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Va., on July 8, 2017**

tion of journalists in particular is wary of conventional euphemisms, he suggests. A late February Time story on the annual Conservative Political Action Conference, for example, cut straight to noting that “Hawley wore his involvement in the insurrection as a badge of honor.”

American University’s Kurt Braddock, an expert on communication related to extremism, thinks the media has largely self-corrected on how it covers dangerous domestic ideologies. That included a shift from merely reporting the existence of the QAnon conspiracy theory to actively debunking it as “adherents began getting a bit too dangerous,” he says. “Without indicating that the disinformation being reported on has no evidence to back it up, it tacitly suggests that the disinformation may have merit.”

Reporter after reporter also expressed a related concern: that the media is waving a flag about extremism, but decision-makers have been slow to react. Power brokers up to and including then-President Trump have also repeatedly been called out for refusing to disavow QAnon and risk alienating members of

their political base.

It “sometimes feels like the right people are not paying attention,” says Vice reporter Anna Merlan. “If they’re not concerned after these people break down the doors to their place of work, I don’t know what it’s going to take.”

Merlan is among the reporters to have documented how hate movements metastasized long before Jan. 6. In her 2019 book, “Republic of Lies,” she described in detail a 2017 white nationalist cookout in Kentucky that preceded the deadly “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville that same year; many extremist figures attended both events. “There is this really persistent ‘Just ignore it and it’ll go away’ kind of sentiment a lot of times about white supremacy [and] virulent conspiracy theories,” Merlan says. “It doesn’t go away. Sometimes it gets elected to Congress.”

#### SUBSTANCE OVER STYLE

**P**art of the reason more outlets are emphasizing that radical beliefs among certain groups aren’t a wacky fringe phenomenon? Those beliefs aren’t “fringe” anymore, as pointed out in a recent NPR report on the three-fifths of white evangelicals who are convinced President Joe Biden’s election wasn’t legitimate.

But just because beliefs aren’t “fringe” anymore

doesn’t mean they should be normalized. Reporters consistently point to coverage of alt-right leader Richard Spencer as a great example of where the press could have been more careful about early portrayals of the standard-bearers of hate movements.

The Southern Poverty Law Center’s profile of Spencer calls him “a suit-and-tie version of the white supremacists of old, a kind of professional racist in khakis,” whose “clean-cut appearance” has obscured his dark goal: Establishment of a white ethno-state.

Some reporters who specialize in documenting hate fear that some of what’s been published about Spencer played into his efforts to draw people to his racist cause. “Let’s Just Stop Writing Long-Form Profiles of Nazis,” pleaded a 2017 piece in Current Affairs by Nathan J. Robinson, calling out coverage of Spencer in major outlets from The Washington Post to Mother Jones to Politico.

“I think these people, to a certain extent, view the press as marks and are working us. As much as they hate us, they’re working us,” says Gira Grant of The New Republic.

The fact that Spencer is highly educated and couches his hateful beliefs in an articulate way is something “a lot of people would say in hindsight gave him a platform and lent him legitimacy, when the focus should have been [on] his rhetoric and his system of beliefs,” agrees Molly Boigon, whose beat at The Forward includes investigating anti-Semitic extremism. “I think that the early coverage of Richard Spencer probably endeared him to people who otherwise wouldn’t have known he existed.”

By comparison, a 2016 item in The Cut chose not to simply highlight the fashion sense of white nationalists as part of a larger profile, but focused specifically on how style was being used to dress up racial animus in a more mainstream way. It wasn’t the only story of that genre, but a useful example of a practice that extremism reporters consistently recommend: Move as directly as possible to expose the misleading or harmful practices of those spreading or acting on hateful ideas.

#### BRING LIGHT, NOT OXYGEN

**T**o that end, journalists versed in covering the far right say technique is key. Darby, author of the book about women in extremist movements, puts it this way: Coverage of hate is about “shining a light, but positioning the light in the right way.”

That’s particularly vital in terms of another argument about far-right coverage that often crops up. Maybe we shouldn’t be covering this stuff at all, because we’re just becoming a megaphone for hate groups and, worst case, a recruitment tool. If “you — meaning somebody in the mainstream media — aren’t casting a very bright, well-positioned light, that just means that they’re going to be able to share their information unfiltered and people are going to access it,” says Darby.

Joan Donovan and danah boyd, who have explored technology’s relationship to bias for the nonprofit Data & Society and elsewhere, have argued for “quarantining” hate speech through “strategic silence” — including by



White nationalist figure Richard Spencer speaks at the University of Florida in Gainesville

reporters not covering it. A familiar example would be a paper refusing to run an inflammatory letter to the editor, making a choice about what voices to amplify and which to deny a platform. Some outlets, including The New York Times, have found themselves on the defensive after readers reacted poorly to coverage they felt went too far in “normalizing” hate.

As Merlan, the “Republic of Lies” author who specializes in exposing conspiracy-fueled activity for Vice, sees it, “The one thing that we keep finding out is that the line between coverage and amplification is thin — but it’s not as thin as some people would have you believe. The idea of not covering these movements at all, to me, doesn’t seem like an option given how influential they are in our world.”

The reporting approach therefore centers on what effects these beliefs are having and how they move through social media and other information ecosystems. “I try not to focus a ton on, ‘Here is the latest crazy thing that QAnon or the anti-vax movement [is] promoting,’” says Merlan.

“It’s more like, ‘Okay, they’re promoting this belief. To what end? What are they selling? What are they trying to do with it? Who’s signing on to it?’” she says. We’ve spent a lot more time thinking about money than we do about the contents of the [false] beliefs themselves.” There’s crossover between the anti-vax and political conspiracy worlds, and Merlan has written about how the promotion of dangerous fringe “supplements” kicked up after Trump mused about using internal disinfectants against coronavirus, for example.

Decisions about what to cover — and what to monitor but not publish — are part of a calculation that a growing cadre of extremism reporters have to make all the time.

“There’s something called a ‘tipping point’ that ev-

erybody on this beat has long used [to] move from just watching far-right spaces, watching conspiracy spaces, watching extreme spaces and then writing about it,” says NBC News reporter Brandy Zadrozny, who was covering extremism long before Jan. 6. That point might come when a dangerous theory escapes a small echo chamber or is amplified by an influential person.

The political and social unrest of 2020 made the tipping-point calculus even more important because of the sheer volume of news that had to be monitored. “Disinformation was being seeded by the president of the United States and feeding extremists and hate groups, [and] wrapping back around through this feedback loop,” Zadrozny recalls. “We were seemingly just trying to explain to a large portion of the country, ‘What are these people talking about? Why is it important to know [and] how does it threaten democracy?’”

Zadrozny, for one, says even radical events have not changed how she makes those news judgments. In her case, she puts the story “on an imaginary scale.” On one side, she weighs the public benefit of reporting something, such as whether it changes policy, holds the powerful accountable, or elevates “marginalized voices.” The benefits have to outweigh the potential harms, such as amplifying lies or mainstreaming extreme thought. Another consideration: Whether the reporting exposes something previously hidden. As an example, Zadrozny points to her work on revealing “the way anti-vaccination activists use Facebook to spread distorted stories of dead children and [to] recruit.”

Trump being out of office and deplatformed from outlets like Twitter and Facebook will shrink that echo chamber, not eliminate it. “People [make] money off of this ecosystem, so they’re not just going to go away,” Zadrozny says.

“I THINK THESE PEOPLE, TO A CERTAIN EXTENT, VIEW THE PRESS AS MARKS AND ARE WORKING US. AS MUCH AS THEY HATE US, THEY’RE WORKING US”

MELISSA GIRA GRANT  
THE NEW REPUBLIC

Reporters who cover the far right must still vigilantly monitor these breeding grounds, including a proliferation of newer platforms, like Rumble, Gab, and MeWe. They don't always have to publicly highlight them, though. Zadrozny says, "There's still a lot of talk; they're just not given a megaphone."

#### FOCUS ON PEOPLE ADJACENT TO THE PROBLEM

**W**hen something does rise to the level of a story, reporters versed in extremism use some common guideposts in their coverage.

Right off, it's worth knowing the media can't and won't fix everything. There are inherent problems with believing even hyperaggressive coverage of figures like Marjorie Taylor Greene, the QAnon supporter elected to Congress from Georgia in 2020, must naturally lead to their rejection, says Lawrence Rosenthal, chair of the Berkeley Center for Right-Wing Studies and author of "Empire of Resentment: Populism's Toxic Embrace of Nationalism."

University of Cambridge researchers have found that people who hold extremist beliefs both viewed the world in black and white absolutes and had more trouble processing evidence and doing complex mental exercises.

In the case of Taylor Greene, Rosenthal says, the kind of people likely to cleave to her brand of politics may already be on her side, and not in the audience of

**"RULES [ABOUT OBJECTIVITY] CAN'T APPLY HERE, BECAUSE THERE ARE MORAL RIGHTS AND WRONGS. AND BEYOND THAT, THERE ARE FACTS AND LIES"**

SEYWARD DARBY/THE ATAVIST

mainstream outlets that provide critical coverage. What if, he asks, more coverage of Taylor Greene's ideology had resulted in her not losing her congressional race, but winning by an even bigger margin? "The assumption that [more reporting on] 'Here's what she is, and here's what she stands for' would have diminished her vote, I'm not sure that's right... It may have had the opposite effect," he says.

Chris Jones, an investigative reporter for 100 Days in Appalachia and a Report for America corps member, says being keenly aware of his audience is a major factor. Recently, he wrote about how local reporters are left holding the bag for national coverage that centers white extremists, not the havoc they wreak. For the local reporter covering extremism, parachuting in and finger-pointing is neither useful nor possible.

Instead, Jones says, there are other ways to have impact. One 100 Days piece, for example, asked, "What is QAnon and Why Does Your Aunt Keep Posting About

It On Facebook?" The point: To focus on people adjacent to the problem who might be confused, worried, or vulnerable, rather than give conspiracy believers the spotlight.

While Jones quickly acknowledges that as a bearded, six-foot-tall, white male Afghanistan combat vet, he can interact more easily with militia-types than others, he doesn't make a point of covering them gratuitously. In a segment with Reveal's "United, We're Not" podcast, he focused his coverage on a Black West Virginia lawmaker targeted by hate purveyors; the voices of the haters were, literally and figuratively, in the background.

#### CALL RACISM AND XENOPHOBIA EXACTLY WHAT THEY ARE

**C**overing militia and hate groups can mean reporters eschewing close contact or attempts to seem even outwardly accepting of vitriolic views or speech. When dealing with the woman she spotlighted in "Sisters in Hate," Darby says she never attempted to come across as open to their supremacist views; she just explained she was trying to get their cooperation to understand how they had embraced those viewpoints.

"You, as the writer, do have to be something of a counterweight to what you're reporting on," she says. "Certainly, I was trained in the school of objectivity and letting things speak for themselves and letting the reader decide ... [Those] rules can't apply here, because there are moral rights and wrongs. And beyond that, there are facts and lies."

When reporting the material in her book, Darby "didn't try to infiltrate anything; I didn't have like an identity that was meant to be sympathetic." If that cost her access to sources, she was ready to accept it. Also, Darby made a pact with herself not to engage in fruitless arguments with white nationalists. "I just kept asking questions and I found [that], at least for me, was a productive way of doing it."

Always calling racism and xenophobia exactly what they are, Darby and others agree, is essential.

One approach Boigon has taken at The Forward is telling the stories of people who once espoused hateful or conspiracist thought, but ultimately rejected it. "It's [like] seeking out former employees of a company. They know what's going on, and [they're] freer to talk about it," she says. Plus, "If you have somebody talking about a system of beliefs in a more critical way, it probably turns fewer people onto those ideas than somebody who's in the throes of it and is trying to recruit participants and might be using a reporter to push that message."

A February piece on Melissa Rein Lively, a former QAnon adherent whose 2020 anti-mask tantrum in a Target store went viral, also fit Boigon's mission. The Forward story focuses more than other accounts on Lively's Jewish upbringing and includes strong messaging about how she got caught up in – and disentangled herself from – the QAnon web.

As a matter of practical craft, Boigon adds, "Any time I'm repeating a claim that conspiracy theorists or white nationalists are making, I try and make it as clear as pos-



SARAH SILBIGER/REUTERS

sible that it's without merit or without evidence. [I] also imagine that that would prevent [the reporting] from being taken out of context, by either bad actors or people who just don't know any better." This is where media critics heavily suggest the "truth sandwich" approach, which relies on emphasizing what is true, not what isn't.

As they work, reporters in this arena take steps to protect their safety. They scrub personal and family information from the web and make thoughtful choices about communicating via email or texts, which can be screenshot and broadcast. Setting up reference files of research on hateful content helps limit traumatic return trips to sinister web outposts.

People (and reporters) of color and immigrants have long been aware of the threats posed by domestic hate groups. Observers have noted differences in political — and media — responses to foreign and domestic threats, and the danger of applying double standards to political activity and speech by whites and non-whites.

Farai Chideya, a longtime political reporter and host of the "Our Body Politic" podcast, talks candidly about having gotten pushback over covering "weaponized racial resentment" as a pivotal factor in the 2016 election. "I think that there's this widespread erroneous perception that Black reporters are not objective and that somehow we're out to protect the Black race," she says. "Let me tell you: I would much rather, based on the political reporting of the past five years, base my reality on what the Black reporters are saying ... it's just closer to reality."

Among others, Chideya points to Astead Herndon of The New York Times for delivering "culturally competent reporting, [including] with white people who clearly have no particular love for being in a multiracial

nation." She points to Herndon's detailed piece on a 2019 "Trumpstock" gathering, where he quoted a participant predicting "nothing less than a civil war" if the president should lose his re-election bid. "It wasn't prejudicial, but it let you know what themes were woven into the self-defined culture of this group," Chideya says.

More broadly, Chideya says organized white supremacy has been undercovered for many reasons. Some whites are "profoundly uncomfortable" with categorizing whiteness as a race the same way Blacks, Latinos, or Asians are covered, or with writing about white and minority issues with an equally critical eye.

To that end, FiveThirtyEight's Perry Bacon Jr. says it's vital to get clarity "on the idea that identity and how it shapes politics is not just a story about minorities."

When it comes to covering the post-Jan. 6 world, says The New Yorker's Osnos, "We're going to have to be as determined to figure out the ideological origins, no matter where they lie, as we were after 9/11. That is going to be uncomfortable for a lot of people, because it's going to mean understanding the role of powerful institutions in this country, including the police and Department of Homeland Security and Christian nationalism and other things that have really not been subject to the same level of scrutiny."

Extremism is as exhausting a beat as it is important, and Seyward Darby readily admits there are days she wouldn't mind covering something else. "They count on the fact that [we're] going to get bored, are going to get tired. We're going to move on. This is why the sustained shining of [a] well-positioned light is important, because they're going to keep doing what they're doing," she says.

"We should not let them have that opportunity." ■

**Reporting on figures who propel extremist lies, like Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, requires journalists to turn the spotlight away from their false claims**



SPECIAL  
REPORT

# LESSONS FROM THE PANDEMIC

Can — or should —  
journalism  
return to a  
pre-Covid normal?





BY ANN MARIE LIPINSKI

# TOUCH POINTS

**THE WORD HAD** so thoroughly infiltrated the language that I no longer noticed it. Then one afternoon, walking across a windy plaza, it brought me to a full stop. A coffee shop had printed it on a long, wide banner, promoting not their coffee but the antiseptic means by which we could purchase it. Our new human condition, a sort of soulless sequestration, had a watchword.

## **CONTACTLESS**

The banner may have ended with an exclamation point but I can't recall. No matter; it was implied. Here was a business that knew, deep into the pandemic, what we wanted. We wanted less, to the point of none.

Contact-less. No contact.

Before the pandemic, the U.S. had not been as quick to adapt to cashless, contactless commerce as some other countries, but our resistance fell as the spread of Covid-19 grew and we sought to lower our risk without sacrificing necessity or pleasure. I remember a friend giddily reporting that a neighborhood ice cream parlor would now deliver sundaes — sundaes! — to her front porch without her ever so much as seeing another human being.

But what kept us safe also kept us isolated and for journalism, this was crippling.

I kept thinking of the old photojournalism aphorism attributed to the street photographer Arthur Fellig, better known as Weegee: “f8 and be there.” But being there — being anywhere these past 18 months — was risky. Entire beats vanished, and so the theater critics, sports reporters, travel writers and others who covered newly-shuttered industries were redeployed to report a public health story for which they had no experience. The less lucky were furloughed or worse.

“During the pandemic, we [learned] to cover the country without leaving our houses,” Lisa Lerer, New York

**Distance kept us  
safe from Covid,  
but reporting  
requires contact  
and connection**



Times political correspondent, writes in this issue. “The mythology of getting a window into the soul of America became a view of my shower curtain, as I conducted interviews in the only room in my apartment with a lock to keep out remote-schooling children. It was easy to miss the access to voters, strategists, and politicians; the kind of reporting serendipity that sometimes happens just by showing up.”

Journalists met hardship with ingenuity to narrow the distance that the deadly virus forced on reporting. Photographers gowned in personal protective equipment got as close to a story as they could or made so-called “porch portraiture” of subjects posing outside their homes. Reporters used Google hangouts, asked subjects to keep audio diaries, and observed their activities via open video lines. The industry pressed for state-of-emergency remote video access to government meetings, then pressed again to continue that access beyond the early months of the Covid crisis.

But not all journalism is contactless and for some, it proved lethal. The Press Emblem Campaign, a Swiss press rights advocate, has tracked the Covid deaths of journalists, a number that has reached 1,798 in 81 countries. The organization has also pushed for early access to vaccination for journalists globally. “The safety of media workers is particularly at risk in this crisis because they must continue to provide information on the ground,” the organization argued. “A number of them died for lack of adequate protective measures when doing their job.”

In the spring of 2020, Kristen Hare, an editor at Poynter, started collecting the obituaries of media workers. The virus did not favor rank. The deaths have included “newspaper owners, cameramen, broadcast pioneers, writers, retirees, young parents,” Hare wrote, and a project she thought would be short-lived is now in its second year.

“This isn’t just something that we’re covering, it’s something that we’re living through and, in some cases, suffering from,” she told me. “I think it can be easy for journalists to feel like a third party in their communities, but this disease does not recognize that distinction.”

Hare does not yet know what her obituary collection will add up to and described herself as a person clutching artifacts from a burning building. “Almost like, grab anything you can, we want you to have this when it’s over.”

“I worry that this will be forgotten and so I’ve tried my hardest to capture as much as possible,” she added. “And I worry that once newsrooms are opened up and everyone is back together, this grief that has been kept at bay will come crashing down on us. Journalists are really good at numbing and powering through,



but I don’t know for how long we can do that without serious damage. In addition to recognizing all the people we’ve lost, newsrooms and journalists are going to have to work really hard to stop being tough guys and start to take our mental health seriously.”

Not long ago, as the U.S. marked a grim milestone of 500,000 Covid dead and hope for a quick end to the pandemic was fading, I reread This Republic of Suffering, historian Drew Faust’s extraordinary 2008 book about death during the American Civil War. As the pandemic’s toll ticked ever upward — now 671,000 U.S. dead, 4.5 million worldwide — I sought some insight into writing about loss on this scale and looked to America’s bloodiest conflict, a war that killed 620,000 soldiers and an undocumented number of civilians.

Especially haunting was Faust’s description of soldiers seeking technological surrogates as they lay dying, an eerie resemblance to stories of Covid patients in their hospital deathbeds, connected to loved ones via iPads. She tells of Yankee soldier

Amos Humiston, found at Gettysburg clasping an ambrotype of his three children, Franklin, Alice and Frederick. “Denied the presence of actual kin,” Faust writes, “many dying men removed pictures from pockets or knapsacks and spent their last moments communicating with these representations of absent loved ones.”

But if war is the work of dying, Faust’s book is a reminder that there is work ahead in grieving — a particular challenge for journalism, which is better at covering action than absence.

“The whole notion of mourning is that it is a process,” Faust told me, “moving through a world in which the lost are no longer with you, sewing up the bonds of community that have been rent by that process. If you don’t go through that, you just deal with unrelenting grief.”

She talked about the beauty and power of Civil War-era mourning customs — moving from a wardrobe of black, to grey, then adding purple, each step causing “emotional forward motion” — and prescribed for a nation the same work Hare had for journalists.

“We haven’t had the rituals, the monuments, the community gatherings,” Faust said. “And that can’t be left undone if we are to return to a world post-lost and not just stay stuck in our loss.”

The other morning I walked my dog past the soccer pitch of an elementary school. A young boy ran up to the fence that separated us and called out to me. “He’s so cute,” the boy said through his mask. He crouched down to snoot level and wriggled his fingers through the chain link. I asked if he had a dog at home and in the next minute learned that he had a cat named Butter, that the cat was missing a front leg, and that the boy was starting his second day of fourth grade. A friend beckoned from across the field and the boy rose to leave, looked back once, then sprinted away.

It was such a modest moment, not the sort I would have tucked away pre-Covid, but that now I do. It was the unfinished stories of Butter and returning to school. It was the promise of what we’ve been missing. It was contact. ■

**PREVIOUS SPREAD:** Kori Jackson holds her son Eli as they spend time together along the beach a day before renewed restrictions due to a surge of Covid-19 cases in Los Angeles in Nov. 2020

PREVIOUS SPREADS: JERRY HOLY/STAR TRIBUNE BRANDON BELL/REUTERS

ABOVE: BEN GARVER/BERKSHIRE EAGLE VIA AP

**ABOVE:** The pre-kindergarten group from the Boys and Girls Club visit through the window with members of the supportive daycare program at the Froio Senior Center in Pittsfield, Mass. in Nov. 2020

# THE OLD NORMAL IS NOT THE NORMAL JOURNALISM NEEDS

**GEORGE FLOYD WAS ALIVE** the last time my newsroom was filled.

Think about that.

So were over 600,000 Americans and four million citizens of the world, now lost to the plague of Covid-19.

Donald Trump was president, the news cycle dominated by his tweets. An insurrection at the U.S. Capitol was unthinkable. Zoom was barely known or widely understood in the general population. We walked and talked and knocked on doors and flitted in and out of crowds like always, without a care or a vat of hand sanitizer.

We had no idea that in a matter of months we would come to judge friends and strangers, instantly, by whether they shielded their faces or not. And they would judge us.

My newsroom at Alabama Media Group under the Advance Local umbrella remains closed to this day and will until it is deemed safe to return. My co-workers hope — or perhaps fear — reopening will come too soon. We hope the virus is contained, that people and communities and states and worlds embrace vaccination at the levels required to lead us back to normalcy. We fear it will not be enough, for the old or the sick or for the immune compromised. Or simply for the unlucky.

Such is the nature of Covid.

Frontline workers — doctors and nurses and reporters and grocery store stockers and uber drivers and on and on and on — have taken on the world all along, from

behind their masks. But for those of us who have worked from home for the last year-plus, the opening of newsrooms and classrooms and other places of employment is filled with hope and fear.

I hope the world is ready. I fear it is not.

I hope I am ready. I fear I am not.

I hope my dogs are ready to be alone for a while. I know they are not.

I hope to look a maskless human in the face and see her simply as human. I fear I will drag the baggage of pandemic judgment with me.

I hope to soon knock on a door and be welcomed inside for an interview, a conversation. I fear my presence will cause anxiety, on both sides of that door, that will make real talk more difficult.

I hope to see friends and coworkers and bosses and sources again. I know — we all know — they will not all be there.

It will be hard to return, whenever that time comes. In the pandemic we discarded old habits and fell into

new ones, new patterns of eating, sleeping, working, exercising, living. We have grown accustomed to reclusiveness, to rolling out of bed for meetings, to calisthenics on the living room rug between Zooms, to apologizing to sources for barking dogs or crying babies or bedhead or bad wi-fi.

But returning to a communal world holds a thrill. We need human contact to feel human, and we need to feel human to report the stories of humanity. We need eye contact to fully connect to one another. We need to overhear each other to fuel that serendipity that occurs in newsrooms, when a comment leads to a conversation which leads to questions which lead to stories which lead to understanding.

I hope we learned lessons from the pandemic to take forward. It is easy to see now that emotional health must be a priority in newsrooms as in other workplaces, that in addition to being the right thing to do it encourages creativity and production and endurance and satisfaction.

We know that hybrid work arrangements make

sense, that one does not have to always be in an office to be part of the office, that virtual meetings can serve as an often-more-efficient substitute. But we know too that office interactions build teamwork, and trust, and collaboration, and relationships. And those things form the foundation of good work.

I would like to say, as 2020 drags across 2021, that I hope we get back to normal. But old normal is not the normal we need. Not in journalism, and not in the world.

The world is a very different place. George Floyd is dead, and Derek Chauvin a convicted murderer. We have begun this thing they called a “racial reckoning,” but real reckoning has yet to come. It will take work, and commitment, and retaining those things learned — if not from 400 years of history — from a year-plus of tragedy and chaos and change.

It is the same in journalism, as in life. We change, with any hope of holding on to the good and discarding the bad. We live and we learn. Or we don't really live at all. ■



KLAWE RZECZY

# THE NEWSROOM IS DEAD. LONG LIVE THE NEWSROOM

**I ASKED A FRIEND** the other day if he was eager to get back to the newsroom we once shared. The publisher has indicated that the doors will soon reopen, with people returning for staggered shifts.

My friend's response was flat: "The newsroom we knew is gone. And it isn't coming back."

He wasn't talking about the physical space, which sprawled over three downtown buildings and six bureaus a few years ago. The future will have staffers from all departments working on one rented floor.

His lament was for the newsrooms that shaped those of us from a certain generation — ones filled with profane language and sharp elbows and high-stress deadlines and the constant fear you'd get beat or get something wrong. But also filled with passion and purpose and creativity and the most interesting people I've ever known.

At their worst, the newsrooms in my career weren't boring. At their best, they crackled.

I think it is the crackle my friend is mourning most. A year-plus of pandemic isolation can't be untangled from the 20 years of digital disruption and economic squeeze that came before. Journalists are weary from the recent past and wary of the future. They've lost longtime colleagues, work for editors they've never met in person, and have no certainty about what comes next.

I'm no longer in the newsroom, so I can't help with that. So, we switched to talk about the work itself. By my reading, it has never been better than in the past year.

I cited his own stories as proof: He has found ways to roam around the Pacific Northwest, a shuttered society notwithstanding. He keeps masks, a sleeping bag and change of clothes in his car — and probably a gas mask and Kevlar vest. Sometimes he drives four hours each

way to interviews. We talked of the photographers we admire — the ones who took readers inside both the horrors and hope of Covid in the early months.

After we hung up, I thought about what the last year taught us, if we're willing to learn. News organizations never seemed to get ahead of the constant demands of the digital revolution. But Covid, in one dramatic sweep, forced true change, much of it long overdue. What a waste it would be for journalists to try to erase those victories and return to pre-pandemic rhythms.

As an industry we must resist the illusions of a better past and embrace some hard-earned wisdom.

Two things rise to the top of my list for editors:

First, when the newsroom doors reopen, keep the meetings out. Nothing douses the crackle faster than a bunch of editors traipsing in and out of meetings. Schedule in-person gatherings for snappy brainstorming and celebrations and, when sadly needed, honesty about shared losses. But if Zoom works for anything, it's day-to-day business. One editor I know still uses a free Zoom account; it forces him to end the planning meeting within 40 minutes.

Second, when the newsroom doors reopen, encourage reporters to stay out in the field, assuming the pandemic allows them to do so. Resist the sense of comfort (and control) that comes from seeing them tethered to their desks, waiting to be tapped in case news breaks. The last year brought news in epic proportions, and your

staffs delivered. Trust them to decide when to be in the field, when to file from home, and when to plug back into the newsroom.

The next two takeaways, directed at reporters:

First, hold on to the initiative you showed in the past year. Make the round of beat sources. Show up at civic meetings. Turn on all of your senses and immerse yourself in stories. Keep the editors informed — but get back into the world.

Second, don't let the limits of time, proximity, or even budgets impose limits on your aspirations, even — and maybe especially — if your aspirations reach toward narrative. It's way too tempting to think, "They won't let me," instead of wondering, "How can I?" Look at the work you and your colleagues have done in the past year. Remember how you did that work — and what you might do even better once the Covid cloud lifts.

There's no substitute for eyewitness journalism, whether it's to face down a dodgy official or observe the moments that create narrative. If you can't be on the scene yourself, you need to turn your sources into surrogates who can bring you as full a story as possible. Ask the kind of questions that help them describe the sounds and sights and smells of their worlds. Help them understand the kind of information you need to write a story that has the full power of the human experience.

A stand-out example is "What Happened in Room 10?" published in *The California Sunday Magazine*. Katie

Englehart burrowed inside events and emotions at the Washington nursing home that was the nation's first Covid hot spot. She reported it all by phone, text, and email from her apartment in Toronto.

Josh Sanburn used a hybrid of in-person and remote reporting to take us inside an overwhelmed funeral home in the U.S. To report "The Last of the First Responders," published in *Vanity Fair*, he wove through storage rooms crowded with caskets waiting for burial, and peered into refrigerator trucks holding more bodies. But much of the emotion of the piece came from the hours he spent on the phone, late into the night, talking to the funeral home director.

Maybe this year of crisis has taught us things we needed to learn and relearn. Publishers had to get clear about the primacy of digital. Readers have hungered for the three most important purposes journalism can serve: Holding power to account, providing essential information, and exploring humanity. And reporters have found ways to do all of that, limits be damned.

Journalism will survive Covid, as it has survived every other crisis in history, and often come out with a better sense of mission. When my friends gather — still mostly by Zoom — we talk about a stronger sense of priorities for our lives. We seem ready, finally, to let go of things we did just because we had always done them, and focus on what truly matters.

This is the time for journalism to do the same. ■



Orlando Sentinel opinions editor Mike Lafferty sits at his desk as staff gather for their final day in the newsroom before permanently vacating amid a coronavirus outbreak in Aug. 2020

PHELAN V. EBENHACK/AP

**Covid has forced true change, much of it long overdue. Now journalists — editors and reporters alike — must resist the temptation to return to old rhythms**

# FOR VISUAL JOURNALISTS, THE PANDEMIC WAS CREATIVE INSPIRATION TO TRY HARDER

**THE PANDEMIC BROUGHT OUT** the very best in my teammates.

I'm the director of photo/video at the Star Tribune in Minneapolis. Throughout my 22 years at the paper, I've observed plenty of stellar photojournalism. But this past year was different.

As our newsroom shut down and most of us headed home to do our work, our photographers and videographers headed out to document the shutdown of Minnesota.

Journalists, especially news photographers, are used to going towards danger. That's part of the job. But early on, when we didn't know exactly how the virus was transmitted, everyone on my team was cognizant that they could become vectors of the illness, spreading the disease as they went from assignment to assignment.

The early lesson for the photo and video team was that they had to treat everyone they encountered as if they carried the virus. Masks, long lenses, outdoor photo shoots only, and wiping down equipment over and over again with Clorox wipes was a daily, repetitive experience. All the commonplace activities to photograph — a Timberwolves basketball game, a street festival, school kids learning in a classroom — suddenly were no more. The world ground to a halt, making it seem almost impossible to do any meaningful photojournalism.

**At the Minneapolis Star Tribune, photographers and videographers didn't flinch from showing what was happening, but they also portrayed subjects in their full humanity**



Law enforcement officers amassed along Lake Street near Hiawatha Ave. in Minneapolis as fires burned after a night of unrest and protests in response to the death of George Floyd

But rather than see all these things as roadblocks, my team took the pandemic as creative inspiration to try harder. Without waiting for reporters to make assignments, the photo/video staff spread through the Twin Cities to find their own stories. Like the out-of-work opera singer who did a concert off his condo balcony to entertain his neighbors. Or the woman praising the Lord with upraised arms in her car during parking lot church. And the 112-year-old celebrating her birthday at her window, waving at the passing car parade in her honor.

By the time we got to the end of May, the team had become very used to taking photos and video at least six feet from their subjects. But the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin changed all that. Suddenly, photographers were deep in the midst of chaotic and crowded protests. Every safety measure taken in the preceding three months went out the window. The virus seemed like a secondary worry to the dangers presented by the National Guard, law enforcement, and some of the protesters.

Faced with an abundance of very visual news to cover, the photographers captured the unfolding historical reckoning happening right in our backyard. It was like the 1992 Los Angeles riots and Selma-to-Montgomery marches happening all at once.

For the photo editors, the Floyd protests were a challenge to explain the root of the anger spilling onto the streets, and not let the images of looting or arson represent anything more than a symptom of the larger problem of racism. They took care to choose images that didn't flinch from showing what was happening, but also didn't put undue emphasis on property destruction over human anguish.

It's now been more than a year since those protests and the pandemic began. What have we learned?

While so much has changed, it doesn't take much to also realize that much remains the same. A few months ago, right before the Chauvin verdict, another Minnesota Black man, Daunte Wright, was killed at the hands of a police officer.

Again, the photo and video staff were back out on the streets, covering night after night of protests outside the Brooklyn Center Police Department. But we did it differently. We spent time inside one of the nearby apartments to capture what it was like for the residents to have tear gas waft into their homes. We took a pass when offered an opportunity to embed with law enforcement on the other side of the fence from the protesters, not wanting to become their unwitting mouthpieces.

These are little examples, but real ones that speak to how the pandemic and the racial reckoning were a reminder that the bedrock essence of our work is to tell people's stories. At a time when safety demanded that we remain isolated, photojournalists did the heroic



Tony Clark cried as he knelt moments before the curfew was scheduled to start near Lake Street following the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis

work of still going out there to be with people, talk with people, and photograph people. Doing this provided a lifeline for all those unable to leave their homes to see what was happening with their own eyes.

As we all emerge from the pandemic, we can't go back to business as usual. The pandemic and the death of George Floyd taught us that we are all inextricably linked — photojournalists and subjects alike. We have a responsibility to tell people's stories in full and nuanced ways, just as we would want our own stories told. We can't cover communities of color only when the worst news happens. When we are covering protests, we have to ensure we aren't just playing into tired visual tropes. We have to take the time to find out how our subjects want to be portrayed, especially if they are from communities we don't cover regularly. It's about respect.

Ultimately, we are with people on their very best day and their very worst day. How we tell their story of that day matters.

Photojournalists' work is simple but important. Maybe now more than ever. ■

PREVIOUS PAGE: DAVID JONES/STAR TRIBUNE

TOP: RENEE JONES SCHNEIDER/STAR TRIBUNE  
BOTTOM: SHARI GROSS/STAR TRIBUNE



Estes Funeral Chapel's Tracy Wesley, Sr. (left) and Curtis Mayfield disinfected a chapel between services

# COVERAGE OF THE VACCINE IN EUROPE HURT MEDIA TRUST. NEWS OUTLETS NEED TO WIN IT BACK

ON MARCH 12, 2021, La Repubblica, Italy's most widely circulated and trusted newspaper, placed a chilling headline on its front page: "AstraZeneca, Fear across Europe."

Some reports linked the vaccine developed by Oxford University to a few unusual cases of blood clots, and several European countries were considering suspending its distribution. In my country, Italy, prosecutors were investigating the deaths of some individuals who passed away days or weeks after getting their jabs. But the connection between the vaccine and some severe side effects was not established.

The European Medicines Agency (EMA) did not ban or discourage any government from distributing the AstraZeneca vaccine and, after carefully reviewing the cases, it mentioned a "possible" link with blood clots and confirmed that serious adverse events were "very rare." "The benefits of the vaccine ... continue to outweigh the risk of side effects," the EMA wrote in a statement.

As it turned out, many other things have a stronger association with serious thrombosis than the AstraZeneca vaccine, like taking a contraceptive pill or

boarding a commercial flight; not to mention Covid itself. As of March 22, the EMA had reviewed 86 cases of unusual thrombosis reported in the EU drug safety database, which collects information on the European Economic Area and the U.K.; at that point, some 25 million people had already received the AstraZeneca vaccine. Statistically, a person is more likely to be struck by lightning or die in an accident at home than to experience fatal side effects from the AstraZeneca vaccine. When La Repubblica ran its much-discussed headline, European health authorities had not released a final assessment of the case and did not caution against getting the vaccine.

A few unconfirmed cases were enough to prompt an unjustified wave of panic over the vaccine. In addition, the Italian Medicines Agency (AIFA) imposed a temporary ban on a supposedly defective batch of the vaccine that may have been linked to some of the deaths prosecutors were investigating. Following EMA's review, Italy resumed the use of AstraZeneca, and the national agency "ruled out problems related to quality and production." But the combination of negative reports con-

tributed to fueling skepticism over the vaccine.

The scare was amplified by the media, and La Repubblica's headline stood out. Its language suggested to readers how they should feel, instead of describing the facts upon which readers should base their feelings.

I don't want to read too much into a single headline, but I think it captures several things that need to be fixed in journalism in the post-Covid world.

The pandemic raised an unmet demand for trustworthy news outlets basing their reporting on scientific evidence while keeping in check tendencies to over-emotionalize the facts or stoke fear. Initially, navigating the complexities of a highly contagious and, in many ways, mysterious virus was a daunting task. But it also offered news outlets the opportunity to earn readers' trust by offering solid, evidence-based, and well-sourced reporting.

After over a year of skimming through scientific papers, crunching numbers, processing data, and carefully attempting to separate signal from noise to build a solid bond of trust with audiences, some European media's rush to panic over the AstraZeneca case was a significant

step back. And things got worse. A few days after the first reports about the potentially fatal blood clots appeared, several European nations, including Germany, France, and Italy, temporarily suspended distribution of the AstraZeneca vaccine, calling for the EMA to review the case.

The political decision provided a sense of legitimacy to the unsubstantiated idea that the risks associated with the vaccine outweighed its benefits, reinforcing the alarmist narrative promoted by some news outlets. That introduced a new dimension to the problem of credibility for the media. In order to gain trust, the media would have to challenge the whole political decision-making process, even though the governments justified it by appealing to the "precautionary principle" or pledging total transparency over vaccine side effects. In the end, the EMA confirmed what it had never denied in the first place: The vaccine was safe, effective, and only associated with very rare serious adverse effects.

But the whole uproar contributed to the erosion of people's trust in the AstraZeneca vaccine. An undersecretary in Italy's Ministry of Health estimated that 15 to 20 percent of the Italian population would end up refusing the AstraZeneca jab. Undoubtedly, some media contributed to amplifying its risks while implicitly downplaying the enormous benefits to the many millions of people who had been safely vaccinated already.

Other outlets attempted to offer a more balanced, data-based approach. "Tension in Europe over AstraZeneca," the legacy newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera* wrote in a front-page headline the same day as *La Repubblica* referred to fear. *Il Corriere della Sera*'s coverage focused on the different approaches taken by different EU countries. And as time went by, coverage proved to be more nuanced and responsible than the headlines that dominated the early days of the case. Weeks later, *La Repubblica* ran a series of stories illustrating how, for instance, "Aspirin is more dangerous" than the AstraZeneca vaccine.

The AstraZeneca case is a cautionary tale for journalists chasing the ultimate good — trust.

In the early stages of the pandemic, media all over the world struggled to provide trustworthy, evidence-based information, and even to admit "we don't know" when that was the case. In a sense, the pandemic was an exercise in humility. It forced reporters and editors to face a plethora of unknowns and to refrain from giving credit to unsubstantiated claims or poorly vetted sources. But in time, as the media grew more confident in covering the crisis, the risk of complacency also grew, and the bond of trust painstakingly built with readers has again been put to the test.

The coverage of the AstraZeneca story captures the idea that trust is not gained once and for all. Trust needs to be earned, and then earned again, every day. It's a marathon, not a sprint. That's a lesson media all over the world are learning, sometimes the hard way.

It's hard to know how the pandemic will affect newsrooms in the long run, but trustworthiness and credibility should be at the center of our efforts to build a healthier media ecosystem. ■



ALESSANDRA TARANTINO/AP

A health worker shows the media how she prepares a dose of the AstraZeneca vaccine to be administered to a patient at a vaccination center set up in front of Rome's Termini central station

Trust needs to be continually earned. That's a lesson newsrooms all over the world are learning, sometimes the hard way

# FOR POLITICAL REPORTERS, THERE WILL BE NO “RETURN TO NORMAL”

**BACK IN OCTOBER OF LAST YEAR**, seven months into the pandemic, life in this fast-growing exurb wasn't exactly normal, but it sure seemed close. A few weeks before the presidential election, maskless people strolled through the center of town, ducking into restaurants and shops as they enjoyed a sunny Fall afternoon.

“I feel like you're inhibiting yourself when you're wearing a mask,” Rachel Antonelli, a pregnant bank teller, said when I interviewed her on the street corner in Delaware, Ohio.

Like many people in this conservative town, Antonelli planned to vote for Donald Trump. She recounted how “credible news sources” — articles posted by friends on social media — reported that you could catch the virus from wearing a mask, a view clearly contradicted by nearly all public health experts. Skeptical of the science and against closures, she took a fairly fatalistic view of the pandemic: “If you are a person that's going to get it, you're going to get it.”

That was hardly the prevailing attitude just 20 miles south in Westerville, where restaurants stood empty and nearly everyone was masked. As she walked through an outdoor shopping center, Patty Jordan, a carefully double-masked retiree, worried about the virus and feared that the lack of more stringent restrictions was costing lives. Trump, she said, “needs to take responsibility” for his role in spreading illness and death across the country.

Jordan, as you probably can guess, was a Biden voter. In a different time, the pandemic would have been

the kind of once-in-a-generation event that rallied a nation. A moment of national crisis, where we all rolled up our sleeves, rationed our sugar and sewed sweaters — or at least tweeted some supportive messages.

But from our early days of sourdough baking, there hasn't been a whole lot of national unity. As college students packed South Dakota bars, restaurants shuttered in New Mexico. While more than 80 million people collected unemployment, the country's billionaires saw their assets grow by \$1.3 trillion. Even illness itself proved to be unequal: Being Black means you are three times as likely to get infected.

Our lived realities of the past year have been vastly different. But perhaps more importantly, when it comes

to our politics, so have our perceptions. We simply don't believe the same set of facts, even when it comes to an issue as essential as our own mortality.

This is a political problem of the most fundamental kind: a decline of agreement on central facts. Some scholars have even given an ominous name to our new reality — “truth decay.” That lack of consensus bleeds into our daily lives: Studies have found that the biggest predictor of local mask use was not demographic characteristics or local policy, but the percentage of people in the area that voted for Donald Trump in 2016.

Increasingly, our politics are defined by two hostile identity groups who see the other not only as political opponents but as threatening and immoral. In

Washington, bipartisan compromise feels nearly unimaginable. And beyond the Capitol, the two parties aren't even having the same conversation, never mind speaking to each other. One survey in March found that Republicans had heard more about the “cancelling” of Dr. Seuss than the \$1.9 trillion stimulus package. Hatred between Republicans and Democrats, according to an analysis by some prominent political scientists, now “exceeds long standing antipathies around race and religion.”

For those of us who cover politics, explaining this widening gap required developing a new set of skills. So, we educated ourselves on fantastical conspiracy theories. We learned to call out presidential lies, even in our news chyrons. We dropped “bothsiderism” to call out attacks on our democracy, like fighting the results of a legitimate election. And we wrote about race in new ways, tracking the impact of views long constrained to the fringes of our political debate on our national conversation.

During the pandemic, we did all of that while learning to cover the country without leaving our houses. The mythology of getting a window into the soul of America became a view of my shower curtain, as I conducted interviews in the only room in my apartment with a lock to keep out remote-schooling children. It was easy to miss the access to voters, strategists, and politicians; the kind of reporting serendipity that sometimes happens just by showing up.

But we all found ways to innovate the conventions of political reporting, changing the decades-old rhythms and day-to-day logistics of news gathering. I tracked down voters by phone and devoted some of those hours that would have been spent in airports to coverage of voting rights.

Before the pandemic, political journalists often wrote about then-primary candidate Joe Biden as a kind of restoration, a reversion to the political norms that we covered for decades. Some of those traditions have already returned to a Washington roiled by the chaos of the Trump years. The daily White House press briefing is back, as are policy papers and quieter week-ends.

But political journalists would be wise not to let that perception of normalcy fool them. The country will face a long period of clean-up from policy choices made during this period. Children suffering the consequences of a “lost year.” Job losses that upended savings and securities for so many families. Mental illness and grief that will linger. Pandemics are times of massive upheaval and the national impact doesn't end when we finally take off our masks.

As I look toward the future that awaits us after the pandemic, I can't stop thinking about those two Ohio towns. There is no “return to normal” coming to those places, no grand unification of their beliefs, news sources, and values. Sure, we may attend campaign rallies once again.

But America will be different. And it will take all our skills — both the traditional and those we learned in crisis — to cover that new reality. ■



KLAWE RZECZY

After the pandemic, America will be different. It will take all our skills — traditional and those we learned in the crisis — to cover the new reality



# IN POLARIZED TIMES, LOCAL PAPERS NEED TO LEAN EVEN HARDER INTO TOUGH ISSUES

**WHEN I WAS 12**, my buddy Robbie Davis and I went to see the movie Titanic. When my dad picked us up that evening, he asked us how we enjoyed the film. I told him about the special effects, action, and adventure in the blockbuster. Robbie shrugged and said, “It was a love story.”

There’s a lesson here on how polarization works in America. At its essence, polarization boils down to a split in the narrative. You see the same motion picture but a different storyline. I see action and adventure, and Robbie sees love.

Words and language matter here. Characterizations do, too. How do you describe the demonstrations that happened this past summer? Were they “the protests” or “the riots?” Or was the situation in your town different and more complex?

The events of 2020 — the pandemic, the aftermath of George Floyd’s death, and the election results — will likely color our politics for the next generation. Inequalities and disparities in our society were put in stark relief, with different interpretations of the remedies for them.

We at local newspapers need to keep that context at the forefront of our minds when we think about our readership.

We’ve faced these split narratives in the American



A man walks with a Black Lives Matter flag along the road at the conclusion of a campaign rally by then Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden in Oct. 2020, in Toledo, Ohio

story before. In the 1960s, the Civil Rights movement, the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and John F. Kennedy, and the Vietnam War divided the Baby Boom generation. It was either a time that led to great societal change or moral rebellion, the moment we turned our backs on our troops or fought a war that lacked moral authority.

The split narrative continues in our debates over the symbols left from the Civil War or the significance of the years 1776 and 1619.

The temptation will be strong in the name of clicks and metrics for local news outlets to barter in the hyperbolic rhetoric seen on some cable programs. But resisting these forces in favor of the steeper, harder climb of redoubling our efforts to understand local issues will pay a significant return on investment in due time.

We may not be able to change the way people in our readership view the larger events surrounding 2020, but we can write authoritatively about the year’s events and their lingering effects at the local level. Tools that will be indispensable in this era will be audience surveys, focus groups, and demographic data to help us bet-

ter understand the way readers view the world. Local news outlets have a unique ability to dig deeper at the ground level into issues affecting their communities. We shouldn’t try to adopt the “one size fits all” approach taken in some national media outlets to hot-button issues.

And there are few things that polarize our country more right now than issues of race. Race is exceptional in its ability to polarize everything from our politics, to our houses of worship, to our own homes.

When it comes to these topics, specificity is your ally. Labels should be applied sparingly, judiciously, and only after great vetting.

I’m not advocating for all coverage to be happy-go-lucky and to avoid controversial topics. I’m arguing that we need to lean into them even harder. The weighty issues our society is grappling with won’t be resolved without talking about them. But I also believe there’s something that needs to factor heavily into our reporting, especially at the local outlets where our subjects are more connected to us than at the national level: grace and empathy.

While a powerful politician or celebrity might merit more scrutiny for doing something racially insensitive or having a minor scuffle with the law, we need to apply different, careful standards to cases involving kids in our communities and those who are not public figures.

We also need to consider our role and responsibilities in setting community narratives. The Boston Globe recently adopted a Fresh Start program to allow people to have stories anonymized or updated to help address historical inequities of coverage.

When we temper our overarching journalistic mission of fearlessly seeking the truth with these values of grace and empathy, we get necessary reader buy-in. That means exercising humility in terms of what we understand about people’s intentions and making sure we make accuracy a non-negotiable priority. Hard-earned experience has shown that we can write the toughest of stories and treat people fairly, earning trust from the reader.

By making sure we’re encapsulating the totality of the debate, we can provide nuanced, equitable coverage — and avoid the pitfalls of split narratives. After all, Titanic is a love story with plenty of action, too. ■

SCOTT W. GRAU/ICON SPORTWIRE VIA AP

Local newsrooms should report with nuance, grace, and empathy — especially when covering political hot-button issues

# POST-COVID, NEWSROOMS SHOULD COVER WHAT'S GOING RIGHT IN INDIAN COUNTRY, TOO

**IN LATE MARCH**, the Navajo Nation reported no new daily Covid-19 cases for the first time in six months. For the largest reservation in the U.S. — whose borders expand across Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico — it was an announcement almost worthy of celebration.

Not long ago, at the height of the pandemic in 2020, the tribe had the highest infection rate per capita in the United States — worse than that of New York and New Jersey and everywhere else the virus left its mark. At the time of this writing, the death toll from Covid-19 within the Navajo Nation is more than 1,400.

For me, as managing editor of Native News Online, a news outlet that covers Indian Country, it was one of the brighter days of the past year. The morning my editor Levi and I read the news we rejoiced over our daily video call. For nearly a year, Levi has published what we call our “Navajo update,” a daily article about Covid-19 in the Navajo Nation. And every day, for nearly a year, Levi has stayed up late waiting for the tribe to release its latest case numbers, reporting the ebbs and flows facing Navajo citizens.

Make no mistake, the coronavirus has impacted Indigenous communities far and wide, but for much of 2020 the crisis in the Navajo Nation was impossible to ignore. This meant a barrage of media coverage focused on the tribe and the pandemic sweeping all corners

of Indian Country — much of it first reported by local sources, such as the Navajo Times and other tribal newspapers, and then by larger outlets like The New York Times and The Washington Post.

It's no secret that Native Americans receive very little national news coverage and are often simply erased from nationwide conversations about race in this country. (Take CNN's usage of the phrase “something else” to refer to voters who are not white, Latinx, Black or Asian during last year's presidential election, for instance.)

But even when Native Americans do make national headlines, the reporting often relies on age-old stereotypes. The story becomes about our suffering, about the problems that exist in our communities, or about how we stand in the way of America's pipelines and its future.

The journalism about Covid-19 in Indian Country, especially in the Navajo Nation, brought up many of these same discussions. Americans learned, many of them perhaps for the first time, about how many Navajo citizens lack access to clean water. They learned about the reservation's substandard housing problem and the overcrowding in those homes, subverting all efforts at social distancing. They also likely learned about the numerous health disparities that have existed in tribal nations for generations, and about how all of this exacerbated the crisis rolling through Indian Country.

Despite the events of the past year, there is hope on the horizon. Many of us have received our second dose of the vaccine and many of our communities are approaching being fully vaccinated, so much so that some tribes are now offering the vaccine to non-Indigenous people.

Much has been lost in our communities, this is true. When workplaces open up again and the first beat of a live in-person powwow sounds off, there will be many who are not there with us. As part of my Nieman Visiting Fellowship, I'm creating an online memorial to remember the Indigenous elders we have lost to Covid-19. The loss of these citizens — the bearers of our languages and traditional ways — due to coronavirus has impacted all of our communities. The goal is to share their stories and the impact their absence will have on their communities and the people closest to them.

For so many national news outlets, the reopening will mean the job is done. Their reporters will move on until the next existential crisis strikes our lands. They are there when the ship in Indian Country capsizes and sinks but are absent when it's finally dragged out of the water, rebuilt, and made even stronger.

At this point, every newsroom across America has an opportunity to do things differently, to bypass a harmful industry trend. Every journalist should be asking them-

selves: What's next for Indian Country, and how do I tell that story?

For us at Native News Online, the work continues. The true impact of Covid-19 in Indian Country may take years to fully understand, largely because of a severe lack of data. We will continue reporting on the victories in Indian Country. We're covering the growing number of tribes setting up their own broadband networks, which will make telehealth and distance learning possible; efforts to reclaim food sovereignty and increase access to healthy traditional foods; and the various ways tribal governments will be spending the \$20 billion allotted to them through the American Rescue Plan — all of which should be on every newsroom's editorial calendar.

We will be there when the powwows and cultural festivals kick off, and we will continue examining the impact Covid-19 has had on our elders and languages and on major industries such as casinos and tourism.

When my editor Levi and I celebrated the Navajo Nation's zero-case milestone a few weeks ago, we considered discontinuing our daily “Navajo update.” We thought, who wants to read good news going forward?

We quickly decided against the idea. Indian Country has lost a lot over the past year, but equally important are the efforts to ensure that what was lost to coronavirus is being reborn. This is just as newsworthy. ■



Wynice Franklin (left) and her mother Louise Johnson receive bottled water from local officials in Church Rock, N.M. Johnson said her biggest challenge during the pandemic is getting water to her home

The mainstream press covered Indian Country at its worst. Its Covid-19 recovery is just as newsworthy

VIDA VOLKERT/GALLUP INDEPENDENT VIA AP

## “A WAKE IN WORDS”

**WHEN I STARTED TO ATTEND WAKES** as a girl, I told my father I didn't know what to say or do.

It was simple, he said. You extended your hand and say, “I'm sorry for your troubles.”

He and my mother always showed up for wakes.

It was one of the ways they stayed close to the friends who, like them, came to America on long journeys by ocean liner. In the 1950s, before Skype or Zoom could have kept them connected to their native Ireland, friends became family.

When Bill and Peggy O'Donnell died, their friends showed up.

There were probably 600 people at each of my parents' wakes and funerals. A good send-off, as the Irish say.

The Year of Covid took that away. Six people couldn't come together to say goodbye, never mind 600.

I've been an obituary writer at the Chicago Sun-Times for about 12 years. But during the pandemic, I felt a new weight of responsibility. I've talked about it with other members of The Society of Professional Obituary Writers.

We sensed that what we wrote was becoming a substitute for public mourning rituals: a wake in words.

The Covid-19 crisis has highlighted the value of obituaries in a time when newsrooms are shrinking, and obituaries often get outsourced. They reflect the history, identity, and values of the communities we cover. Readers and viewers respond to them. As we move forward into a (hopefully) post-pandemic world, it's important to remember how journalists and news organizations — and obituaries — were part of getting through this crisis.

During the pandemic, I tried even harder to seek out quotes, not just from relatives of the deceased, but from their employers and friends and restaurant customers. From fellow tango dancers and gospel singers and dart players.

Social media — always an important source of early news alerts — became a lifeline and deathline. On March 17, 2020, Fiona Whelan Prine posted on Facebook that she'd tested positive for the coronavirus. I started



Jasmine Igtanloc (left) and twin sister Jenilee Silva put fresh flowers at their father's grave in San Bruno, California. Both of their parents, Mariquita Baluyot and Jesus Baluyot, fell ill from Covid-19. Mariquita was in a coma for several months, but Jesus died

watching for updates. Before her husband, John Prine, was a famous singer and songwriter admired by Bob Dylan and new Nashville stars, he worked as a mailman just outside Chicago.

Days after her post, Mr. Prine's family revealed he was critically ill with the virus.

I started to write: John Prine's lyrics were like Edward Hopper paintings. His songs conjured empty Greyhound stations, pawnshops, rusty railroad tracks, flies in the kitchen and nights with too much tequila.

I hoped the advance obituary would be left unused for years. I wanted to see John Prine perform again.

When he died, some people in Chicago felt as if they'd lost a relative.

As the pandemic continued, I could see, through paid death notices and social media, how our rituals were mutating. Grief was exacerbated by the absence of human touch. Elbow bumps felt inadequate, whether the cause of death was the coronavirus or something else. Often, obituary writers listened to people describing

their pain at not being able to hug each other or wipe away tears.

I started writing about streamed graveside services and “wakes on wheels” — drive-thru wakes.

Funeral home parking lots no longer feature the orange cones that guided mourners past windows where they paid respects through glass. But I think streamed services and Zoom wakes are here to stay. Like obituaries, they offer vulnerable and immunocompromised people something precious and healing — the chance to connect and mourn with a community.

At the height of the pandemic, there were too many requests for obituaries to assign each one. I and other obit writers tried to bear witness to a world-changing calamity by writing about people of every social class, ethnicity, and profession.

A renewed commitment to diversity is the right thing to do. The popularity of the “Forgotten No More” feature in The New York Times, focusing on fascinating and influential people who never made it onto obituary pages

dominated by the life stories of white men, proves this.

The pandemic emphasized the need to have professional journalists and trusted voices accurately reporting the news, offering platforms where people could turn in a time of historic isolation. It showed me the importance of strong local news organizations at a time when they are under great threat.

And it demonstrated that it's critical to have the skill to draw out the essence of someone we're writing about. Many of the people obituary writers speak to have never done a news interview before. English may not be their first, second, or third language.

Unless news organizations continue to invest in obituaries, the next time we have a crisis, one fundamental way of keeping people together — and informed — will be lost.

During the pandemic, a lot of obituary writers didn't have any training for this kind of catastrophe.

We showed up.

And people opened up and spoke to me after I told them, “I'm sorry for your troubles.” ■

GABRIELLE LURIE/SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE VIA GETTY IMAGES

Unless news organizations continue to invest in obituaries, a fundamental way of keeping people together — and informed — will be lost

# FOOD WRITING NEEDS TO BALANCE SERVICE JOURNALISM WITH HARD NEWS

Going forward, food reporting needs to provide more robust coverage of a business undergoing historic change

**THE FIRST DEATH REPORTED FROM COVID-19** in the U.S. occurred about 30 miles from where I read about it, at the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, on the last day of Feb. 2020. I was on my way home to New Orleans from a reporting trip to the Pacific Northwest. In a few days, I would be bedridden with a fever.

I never found out if I caught the coronavirus — tests weren't readily available at the time — though it soon became clear that I had been socializing, precociously and masklessly, in two hot spots during the initial stages of the virus' spread. That early brush with what would soon become a consuming crisis made me realize, sooner than I might have otherwise, that my job as a food writer for The New York Times was about to drastically change.

I had been working at The Times for less than a year when the pandemic began, and I was still adjusting to being a national correspondent after working at local newspapers for 25 years.

Suddenly, restaurants everywhere were closed, temporarily and permanently, or only partially open. Within weeks, eight million restaurant employees were out of

work, according to the National Restaurant Association. Dining rooms as we knew them were potentially dangerous, for both customers and staff.

The slate of features and profiles I was set to write in the months ahead, a few of which I'd already traveled to report, pertained to a world that no longer existed. After contributing reporting to breaking news stories about restaurants closing across the country, I wrote an early pandemic piece about what I was hearing from restaurant people where I live: that this health crisis was more difficult to navigate than even Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

The story doubled as a personal reminder that I had relevant experience to draw on. In New Orleans, Katrina wasn't just a deadly storm. If you lived in southeast Louisiana in the mid 2000s, it was an exhausting, inescapable fact of life that blocked out the sun for years. (By my count at least until 2010, when all eyes turned to the BP oil spill.)

But in the weeks and months after the storm, it was hard not to be frustrated by the inability to capture the enormity of the disaster with any one byline. Last spring, as I watched the food system crack, largely due to the crumbling of the dining culture I'd covered for half of my life, I thought of Katrina and took a deep breath. I reminded myself that we were going to be living this

story, not just covering it — and that it wouldn't end anytime soon.

My mantra: This is a marathon, not a sprint.

Having the luxury of working for a resource-rich news organization, where business reporters, metro reporters and fellow food journalists all worked to document our buckling food system, I looked for local stories that spoke to the national crisis: food banks in South Florida, where the harvest season comes early, struggling to meet a spike in demand while food went to waste on local farms; a beloved North Carolina chef whose obsession for corned ham could inspire housebound home cooks; a celebrated Chicago restaurant whose staff revolted over the abusive treatment of its chef-owner.

The Chicago story came in June, as the national outrage over the killing of George Floyd compelled restaurant workers across the country to speak out against pay inequities and workplace harassment and abuse that falls disproportionately on immigrants, people of color, women, and members of the LGBTQ community. If Covid revealed, as many owners argued, that the business model for restaurants was broken, the calls for racial justice that followed the killing of George Floyd amplified the voice of restaurant workers testifying that the old model never worked for them.

I started writing about restaurants in the mid '90s,

when the job, at least as it was practiced at most mainstream publications that could pay food writers a living wage, was primarily about pleasure — service journalism for readers privileged enough to obsess over where to spend their money dining out.

Change to the field came too late, but it did come, in 2017, when the #MeToo movement brought a still-unfolding reckoning over sexual harassment and discrimination to the restaurant business.

The crises of the past year have deepened that reckoning, forcing much of the country to reexamine why inequities persist in American life. (One of the best-read stories I've written for The Times was about how that reexamination impacted the way Americans celebrated our last Thanksgiving.) Racial and gender imbalances have long been on display in American restaurants — in the divide, for instance, between dining room and kitchen employees, and between restaurants that traditionally capture the attention of mainstream media and those that don't.

In the years ahead, the work of food journalists will need to look a lot like it did this past year: a balance of service journalism and stories that make people feel good (we still need those), and hard news reporting about a business that is undergoing historic change and a labor force that has gone unnoticed for too long. ■



Doug Farkas serves a Senate Beer by Right Proper Brewing at Boundary Stone in the Bloomingdale neighborhood of Washington, D.C., on the first night of the pub's reopening on Thursday, April 15, 2021

TOM WILLIAMS/CO ROLL CALL VIA AP IMAGES

# AS THE WORLD CHANGES, SPORTS JOURNALISM MUST MEET THE MOMENT

Sports shouldn't be siloed off from the rest of the newsroom, diminished as the "toy department"

**ONE OF THE PANDEMIC'S** most significant sports moments took place before a nationally-televised basketball game on Aug. 4, 2020 on black t-shirts with bold white lettering. The all-caps message: VOTE WARNOCK. The t-shirt designers and wearers: WNBA players.

At the time, Reverend Raphael Warnock was a little known U.S. Senate candidate in Georgia, polling a distant third in the race. The incumbent, Kelly Loeffler, was a Republican who co-owned the WNBA's Atlanta Dream and called Black Lives Matter a movement intent on promoting "violence and destruction across the county" in a letter to the WNBA commissioner. After the t-shirts debuted, Warnock's poll numbers climbed along with donations to his campaign. The WNBA and the t-shirts received widespread coverage, making national headlines everywhere from ESPN to The Washington Post to People Magazine.

A couple weeks later, I interviewed Los Angeles Sparks forward and WNBA Players Association president Nneka Ogumike for a column. We talked about the "VOTE WARNOCK" t-shirts and the WNBA's history of social activism. "Our movement has found its moment," she said. The statement was prescient. In January, Warnock won his runoff election against Loeffler, becoming Georgia's first Black senator and helping flip the U.S.

Senate in the Democrats favor.

The WNBA helped make that happen.

For many sports journalists, the pandemic expanded the beat beyond competition-focused coverage. Of course, before March 2020, there were human interest features, hard news stories, and hard-hitting investigations. There were storylines that put sports in a larger context and raised awareness. Colin Kaepernick kneeling to protest police violence. The U.S. women's national soccer team fighting for equal pay. Olympic gymnasts speaking out against sexual abuse. Gay athletes coming out during their professional careers. But the coronavirus — and the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer — brought a heightened sense of the many ways sports intertwine with the events shaping society. Sports reporters, by necessity, had to become politics, health, and culture reporters as well. That was what the moment demanded.

Part of the shift can be explained by fewer games to cover. I filled the early days of the pandemic with breathless reports of cancelations and postponements. But when the sports world shut down and games stopped, it offered sports journalists an opportunity to step back, gain perspective, and reassess priorities. That kind of inquiry doesn't happen easily because of the non-stop nature of sports and the coverage it generates. See five NBA games scheduled for Christmas Day. There is always something to cover. And in my experience with outlets that churn out daily coverage, there is rarely the space or time to reflect on, to struggle with, the bigger sports and society-related issues.

On a more fundamental level, at a time when we were desperate for community, sports became an avenue for connection that went beyond the game, for entry into difficult conversations, for action and for impact. The story quickly went from which team won to which players were protesting for social justice, from records set to which pro athletes were talking about mental health, an issue that took on greater significance as the pandemic wore on month after month. We covered mask policies and the controversy around vaccine mandates, Covid-19 protocols for college sports, and unemployment as thousands of industry workers were laid off because of upended seasons and empty arenas.

When we emerge from the pandemic, sports journalism needs to keep meeting the moment. It's no longer enough to report on which players protest for social justice or which athletes talk about mental health, to react to moments when sports collide



with the big issues of the day. We need to explore what motivates athletes to act, to examine the power dynamics and systemic inequities at play, to think about what gets underreported, to investigate the gaps between the optics and the reality. To accomplish that, newsrooms should consider focus areas that combine sports and social justice, sports and gender, sports and race, sports and health science. But more important than the kinds of cross-disciplinary coverage is the intent and commitment behind them.

Take, for example, USA Today Sports' review of the political contributions of 183 team owners in the run up to the 2020 election. The paper found "nearly 86% of those funds [went] to Republican candidates and causes," including political action committees aligned with President Donald Trump. The article highlighted how owners publicly backed Black Lives Matter, but privately and financially supported candidates that railed against the movement. The story provides a good example of accountability journalism that connects the dots between sports, politics, power, and race. There needs to be more of that.

Meanwhile, The 19th, which describes itself as an "independent, nonprofit newsroom reporting at the intersection of gender, politics and policy," raised important, accountability-oriented questions with its stories timed around the Tokyo Olympics. One piece asked, "How have sexual assault protocols evolved at the Olympics?" and another wondered "Will the Olympics ever truly welcome nonbinary athletes?" Another example is The New York Times' piece on "the absence of a professional wheelchair league in the United States." It was a good reminder of the breadth of the sports world and the communities that deserve more regular coverage.

NED DISHMAN/WNBAE VIA GETTY IMAGES

The sports landscape will undoubtedly change again in dramatic ways, and when that happens the sports media should make time to step back, to reexamine its priorities, and recalibrate to meet future moments. We need to build that reflective, perspective-broadening muscle and exercise it regularly.

How do sports departments and sports journalists do that? How do they balance daily, incremental coverage with more time and resource-intensive stories at the intersection of sports and society? That question concerned newsrooms pre-pandemic. Now, it's even more critical as we plan for the next normal amid shrinking newsrooms. Even though big, well-staffed national outlets enjoy a natural advantage, the push-pull between incremental coverage and deeper dives remains a fundamental, evergreen challenge for everyone.

One solution is to make sure that sports isn't siloed off from the rest of the newsroom, diminished as the "toy department." Collaborations inside newsrooms should be valued as much as collaborations between newsrooms. Also, it's incumbent on sports journalists and sports outlets to see that the social and cultural significance of sports comes in many forms and many voices, especially as sports interest fragments into smaller and smaller niches. Yes, the games and all that surrounds them matter. But so do stories that explore the intersection of sports and society, that dive into difficult subject matter and bring different perspectives to the forefront. Those stories make sports and sports coverage more meaningful, accessible and impactful. In the future, those stories should be seen as essential coverage, not some kind of special occasion journalism trotted out amid a pandemic or surge in social activism or moment of controversy. ■

As the pandemic halted games, sports journalists turned their reporting towards causes championed by athletes, like WNBA players' tributes to Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and the Black Lives Matter movement

# SCHOOL EXPERIENCES VARIED WIDELY IN THE PANDEMIC. YOUR JOURNALISM SHOULD REFLECT THAT

Finding the students and families who can't make it to school board meetings or protests needs to be a top priority for reporters

**THE CLOSURES BEGAN AT RANDOM**, like kernels bursting out of hot oil onto the kitchen stove. A high school in Snohomish County, Washington, closed for cleaning after a student tested positive. Two districts in Westchester County, New York, would close for several days after two students and a parent were possibly exposed to a novel coronavirus. Two schools in the wealthy Boston suburb of Wellesley closed abruptly after a parent tested positive.

It was the first week of March 2020. Several countries had already shuttered schools in the hopes of containing outbreaks. In the United States, by the second week of March, seven governors mandated statewide school closures. Massachusetts and others quickly followed suit.

Like many journalists, I hunkered down as the pandemic ramped up. I was one of four people covering early through higher education for WBUR, one of Boston's public radio stations. We were

inundated with incremental updates and questions from our audience to investigate, each with equal pressing importance. There weren't enough of us or enough time to report everything. It quickly became clear the constant triage of rolling news coverage was not sustainable. This moment required a different approach — not just in terms of what we were covering but who we were covering.

As novel as the situation was, there was a familiarity to this breaking news wave. Like many others, I woke early and went to bed late, trying to make sense of what was happening and why. But we knew, as the shock waves of news stretched into days, that we couldn't put enterprise reporting on hold for the entirety of the crisis. Our audience needed us to do more than just react to the latest press conference or policy announcement.

I couldn't stop thinking about the myriad of services families rely on that schools provide: meals, dental care, specialists, a safe space with a caring adult. Much of that support went away almost overnight. Who could weather this upheaval? Who wouldn't? What would make the difference for them? Was a large part of an entire generation at risk of being left behind?

We hear a lot about inequity in the field of education: Who has access to opportunities, who doesn't, and why? The pandemic acted almost as a high-contrast dye exposing how newsrooms cover these long-standing, structural barriers that BIPOC communities and poorer Americans face. The crisis laid bare that it is not enough to attend a school committee meeting or a protest to check the pro and con boxes for your story. If education journalists are serious about covering inequity, we need to seek out the families and students that aren't able to attend those events. Otherwise, we are only telling part of the story — the easiest one.

The pandemic made clear that we had to prioritize reaching the students who were not able to log on because of technological, economic, behavioral, or other reasons. It takes more work, but it is fundamental. And it's a lesson we need to carry forward.

Accessing classrooms has always involved hurdles — most often in the form of a public relations flack acting as guardian of the building. Once the classroom moved to Zoom or became a packet of printouts, we all had to rely on our sources more heavily to understand what the classroom reality was. But our sources only



have their reality, from their end of the screen. As every teacher knows, each student has their own needs and issues they are dealing with.

Some of the sourcing for our reporting came with little effort as so much of our work shifted online. We could get updates from press briefings and school board meetings online quickly without leaving our desks. Even protests over school closures and reopenings were livestreamed. We could churn out the news efficiently to our audience.

But that efficiency came with a price. In that fast pace, most people we ended up speaking with had reliable internet. Participants logged into a public meeting were able to work from home or had schedules flexible enough to accommodate Zoom meetings. According to the most recent federal data, 14% of children nationwide did not have internet service at home. Districts rolled out hotspots, and some students drove to school or college parking lots in order to complete their work. Many students were not logging on at all. I worried we could start reporting from a delusion: thinking we had unprecedented access when we were actually on the sidelines.

The key is being out in the field, connecting with students in their homes or hang-out spots. The most stand-out reporting from this period was accountability journalism with a narrative heartbeat. Take, for example, Samantha Shapiro's powerful

reporting on homeless students for The New York Times Magazine. She spoke with more than a dozen families to understand the way the system is set up and what a strain that is for families. The Boston Globe sent journalists to school meal pickup sites and bus stops at the beginning of the pandemic to understand and follow what the disruptions meant for some families. That kind of engagement should continue. Smaller newsrooms should prioritize that relationship-building journalism as a core tenet of how they cover their communities.

No one was untouched by the pandemic. But it was not a singular experience. Some of us have lost loved ones, others don't have a single close family member or friend who became ill. Some of us discovered the joy of pickleball or pickling jars, while others were crushed by the avalanche of responsibilities on our shoulders. Some teachers discovered new techniques and perspectives, others have been wrung dry. Some students learned more independence and confidence or took on new projects and activism, others have back-slid on the many hard won progressions. Even these are over-simplified dichotomies. There are so many more gradations.

We have an obligation to the communities we report on to prioritize deep listening and engagement, to report deeply and fully, and to embrace the nuance of their experiences. ■

**Kindergarten teacher Amber Updegrave interacts with her students at Warner Arts Magnet Elementary in Nashville, Tenn. All of her students were masked up at the school**

JOHN PARTIPILO/AP



Helen Branswell

# “I THINK I JUST HAD THE MOST FRIGHTENING INTERVIEW OF MY LIFE”

**IN A CAREER THAT HAS SPANNED** 40 years, Helen Branswell has covered some of the biggest health stories of the last several decades: the 2009 H1N1 flu pandemic, the West African Ebola outbreak, and the Zika virus. In 2003, she covered the SARS outbreak, her first experience reporting on an epidemic, from Toronto — one of the hotspots that saw hundreds of cases and dozens of deaths.

Branswell is a senior writer at STAT, a media company focused on health, medicine, and science, where she covers infectious disease and global health. For the past 21 months, she has led their Covid-19 coverage, writing about everything from the rise of variants to vaccine development to the spread of the disease itself. Her coverage garnered a 2020 Polk Award in the public service category.

Nieman Reports spoke with the veteran reporter about the changes Covid-19 brought to the public health beat. This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.

## At what point did you realize that the pandemic was going to be such a big story?

I first saw that something was going on in China on New Year's Eve. I didn't know at all that it was going to be as big as it was, but I knew it was something that I had to watch because China has been the source of several disease outbreaks over the last 15 years or so. I remember having an interview with Trevor Bedford [a vaccine and infectious disease researcher at Fred Hutch, an academic, teaching, and research institution based in Seattle] in late January. At the time, the rule of thumb was that each case discovered outside of

China probably represented about 500 undetected infections. He thought there were 13 cases outside of China, but I said, 'No, it's up to 29 cases now.' He became audibly flustered. 'If it's not contained shortly, I think we are looking at a pandemic,' he told me. I emailed my editor when I got off that call and said, 'I think I just had the most frightening interview of my life.' I would say, by then, I knew.

## These days, if you are a health or medical reporter, your job has somewhat morphed into being a political reporter as well. What has that shift meant?

One of the big, big things about this story has been how political it's been, and it's frankly, something that I hadn't anticipated. I can't think of another disease outbreak that I covered that has been as political. Measles outbreaks can have political elements sometimes — there's the anti-vaccine crowd and how they try to exert pressure. There's the question of what public health departments are willing to do to enforce mandates. That's often quite political, but it's nowhere near as political as this event has been. The Trump administration's approach of downplaying the threat because it didn't fit into the narrative they wanted to tell going into the election was just really astonishing, and the country is still paying [for it]. The fact that people can disbelieve objective truth — because somebody told them, that's not white, it's black — is an enormous challenge.

## How have you dealt with the increasing politicization of your beat?

In the day-to-day of my work, I just report on and write the stories that I think are important and that my editors think are important. The fact that some portion of the public would disbelieve them, I can't factor that into the decisions about what I write or how I write. Not reading the comments or engaging on social media also helps. Before the pandemic, I enjoyed Twitter a lot more than I do now.

## Science evolves, which presents challenges when trying to explain complex issues that unfold in a non-linear fashion. How do you convey that to an audience, especially one that's so polarized?

The public is getting a lesson in real time about



science and how messy it can be. Nobody — neither journalists nor the science community — does a very good job explaining to people the process. We need to do better in saying, 'This is the best information that we have today, but tomorrow we will have more information and it might change our view of things.'

People lambasted the CDC and Tony Fauci, for instance, for initially saying there was no science to support the public wearing masks. If you remember back to March and April of last year, the government was urging people not to stockpile medical grade masks because there was a shortage of protective equipment for frontline workers. There were zero studies about people wearing cloth masks, but the CDC was giving people advice on how to turn a bandana into a mask. That data emerged over time, and the CDC changed its advice. That was sold as an error, like 'You got it wrong, why should we believe you about masks? If you got that wrong, why should we trust you about vaccines?'

That was useful for the politicians who wanted to downplay the significance of the pandemic, but it hasn't really helped the public at all. It's difficult to explain to people that the science could change, but we have to be clear that it's not us backtracking. It's us finding out more stuff. When you put it that way, I think most people would find it intuitive.

## Where does that narrative come from? Are the politicians setting the agenda and the press following suit? Or do journalists need a better vocabulary to explain these issues?

It's a mix of the two. It's definitely in the interest of the politician to frame changing advice as evidence of incompetence. But I also think in general there's a temptation not to put as many caveats into a story as the story might need because, if you do, it can feel like you are undermining the story. This isn't so much about vocabulary as it is about choices. I've become even more convinced that writing about individual studies as they emerge is part of the problem. Very few studies offer a definitive answer. They add something to our understanding of things by building on what's been known before or by contradicting what's been known before. There are some exceptions, but every time somebody reads a headline that's about one particular study, there's the possibility that they see that as the entire answer, and it rarely is. Different outlets have different demands of their reporters and different standards, but I think in general feeding your readers or listeners or viewers simple answers to complex questions is not helping them.

## What lessons did the pandemic teach you so far that you'll carry forward in your work?

Get more sleep! I've also diversified my source base substantially. When you find people that you trust, that are really knowledgeable and will always answer your call, there's the temptation to go back to them over and over again. It's been really useful in this pandemic to find new voices and include those in the coverage. That's something that I will continue to work at going forward. ■

**A digital highway sign promotes Covid-19 vaccination in Vancouver, Washington. New advances in the pandemic demonstrate how messy the scientific process can be, Branswell notes**

STAT reporter  
Helen Branswell  
on why feeding  
your audience  
simple answers to  
complex questions  
is not helping them

NATHAN HOARD/GETTY IMAGES

# DURING COVID, JOURNALISTS WERE LESS PACKAGED. LET'S KEEP IT THAT WAY

**EVERY TUESDAY AND THURSDAY**, back around 2002, I would wrap my son in warm clothes and tuck him into a covered car seat. Only his little face would be showing as I'd snap the seat out of its base after arriving at the Centex headquarters in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, to wait in the lobby of the area's largest homebuilder for an early morning interview with the CEO.

Or my son and I would show up at a construction site or meet developers on a plot of land where trees had recently been clear cut or at a model home. I can't remember precisely, but Kyle was about one year old, give or take a few months.

Not once did he cry during any of our trips or as I conducted an interview. (I don't think I would have been as lucky a couple years later when my daughter, Lyric, arrived. She was a fussy baby and made her presence known everywhere.) But every day I wondered when my editors would find out about what I had been doing and what they would say if they ever did.

I never told them. And apparently no one called into the newsroom asking why a young journalist was bringing a baby to his interviews. Maybe because I got all my work done on time and well enough on my real estate and housing beat that it raised no suspicions, even though twice a week I wouldn't show up in the office until well after lunch.



On those days, my wife was trying to put in a few hours with the school district after having left her teaching career when we had children. We couldn't afford childcare and had to make do, which meant Kyle had to come with me on the back roads of Horry County and to high-dollar developments and the offices of bankers and officials who could help me understand the latest sales figures and the relationship between the 10-year treasury and mortgage rates.

That juggling forced me to learn the rhythm of the Myrtle Beach area's business community better. I figured out when it would be easiest to catch a CEO directly — often between 8 a.m. and 8:30 a.m., when the secretary would be preoccupied with other things, and the CEO would answer the phone himself or be moseying through the lobby alone — an insight I used even after those days of dragging Kyle to interviews had ended.

This was in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks, when

ABOVE: KLAWE RZECZY; RIGHT: COURTESY OF ISSAC J. BAILEY

newsrooms throughout the country had begun beefing up security measures and rethinking how journalists did their jobs in response to an unprecedented event. I never did tell my editors about juggling my family responsibilities that way because I felt guilty, as though I had done something wrong, broken some unspoken code.

Getting my job done well wasn't enough. I had to get it done well in a particular way, a traditional one even though I had proven that tradition and excellence weren't always the same.

I'm reminded of that period of my career now because in the coming months, many journalists and most newsrooms will be facing something similar — trying to figure out what to do in the aftermath of a once-in-a-century pandemic that upended everything.

Should the doors to the downtown offices be flung back open and everyone expected to saunter back in like a family of dutiful ants?

Or should remote work remain the norm?

For me, how we end up answering such questions isn't as important as why.

For all the harm Covid-19 has caused — and the harm has been immense — it forced us to rethink everything. I'm hoping in the coming months, everything we do will still be under intense examination. I imagine had we been regularly working via Zoom when I was taking Kyle to interviews, I would not have felt the need to hide my struggles with juggling family and work responsibilities.

During Covid, we saw kids and pets sashay in the background of live TV interviews and found it cute, not disconcerting. As long as the journalist got the job done well, no one complained. It was understood that a journalist wasn't just a journalist but also a father or mother or husband or wife or boyfriend or girlfriend or cat sitter or dog lover or someone who wore pajamas and slippers, too.

We got to know journalists beyond the byline or made-up face on the screen, sometimes in ways that impressed us, sometimes in ways that depressed us. It was sometimes inspiring, sometimes messy. In short, it was ... real. Journalists were less packaged.

Going forward, I hope newsrooms find a way to continue cultivating that new norm rather than feeling the need to re-establish the pre-Covid norm of having a kind of wall between the personal and professional; we all know real life has always been messier than that. Let's face it. Being a journalist has become a 24/7 job. We are on all the time, even when we aren't chasing a lead or scanning court documents to verify a fact for an investigative report.

I don't think that's going to change. It doesn't have to. It's hard to turn your brain off from the news, whether in your local community as you hit the locals' favorite for lunch or as you scroll your Twitter timeline. But in order to make that work, to ensure a healthier industry filled with healthier people, the whole of the journalist must be taken into account in ways that weren't always true pre-Covid.


Newsroom leaders need to recognize that almost on a dime we were able to transform how we did our jobs — because we had to. More forthrightly recognizing and dealing with the stress this job can have on our mental health has been a major step forward. There seems to be less of a tendency to force everyone to just grin and bear whatever they face and more of an acknowledgement that we must think outside of traditional expectations. I suspect that when the doors of newsrooms are flung wide again, greater attempts to foster the comradery too many of us took for granted will come with it. And there's reason to believe we won't soon forget what we learned about the necessity of greater diversity.

My hope is that the industry will carry those lessons forward so that today's young journalists won't feel guilty juggling their duties as parents like I did. ■



**Issac J. Bailey with his son, Kyle (left), and daughter, Lyric (right). When Kyle was an infant, Bailey used to take him to interviews because he and his wife didn't have childcare**





# ALEXEI NAVALNY, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND THE STATE OF THE FREE PRESS IN RUSSIA

The space for independent Russian journalism is shrinking, but a handful of small outlets still attempt to offer an alternative to state media

BY ELIZAVETA KUZNETSOVA

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**ON THE MORNING OF APRIL 29**, Russian opposition leader and blogger Alexei Navalny appeared in court via video link, fighting the second in a series of legal charges filed against him since the beginning of the year. His appearance was skeletal, having just ended a 24-day hunger strike to demand adequate medical care during his imprisonment in Penal Colony No. Two (IK-2) outside Moscow, one of Russia's harshest correctional facilities.

Upon his return to Russia in January, after recovering abroad from an assassination attempt involving Novichok poisoning, Navalny was detained and prosecuted in a hastily organized court proceeding at a local police station. Accusing him of failure to report regularly to the police while he was in a coma in Germany, the court jailed him for 30 days in the lead up to a February trial that resulted in a prison sentence of more than two years. A joint investigation by the Russian independent online newspaper *The Insider*, *Bellingcat*, *CNN*, and *Der Spiegel* linked the Novichok poisoning to Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB).

Following the sentencing, protests in support of Navalny swept the country, resulting in mass arrests unprecedented in

modern-day Russia. In January and February, Russian authorities detained up to 159 journalists covering the demonstrations, according to the Glasnost Defense Foundation, a nonprofit that helps protect journalists in Russia.

But on that late April morning, Navalny was appeal-

ing another charge — insulting a World War II veteran, 94-year-old Ignat Artemenko.

Artemenko had been featured in a promotional video produced by the Russian state-run television network RT that aired in June 2020. In it, he, together with other prominent Russian personalities, encouraged viewers to vote for amendments to the constitution. Among other things, these changes would reset the clock on President Putin's term limits, enabling him to hold the office twice more. They were approved the next month in a contested referendum.

In weekly YouTube live streams Navalny hosted until the Novichok attack, he repeatedly pointed out that the amendments had already been approved in a legal procedure outlined in the Russian constitution. In his view, the vote was a propaganda stunt to increase popular support for a decision that had already been made. Navalny criticized a number of famous actors who appeared in pro-amendment agitprop — the Soviet word for propaganda materials — in his broadcasts and on Twitter, calling them “traitors.” The statement prompted a campaign in support of the veteran, expanding from Russian state media to the personal YouTube channels of pro-Kremlin commentators.

The dual prosecutions of Navalny highlight the deep political polarization in Russia, where social me-

dia amplifies the divide. Some 42% of respondents to a February survey by the Levada-Center, a Russian independent polling organization, said they got their news through social networks. While Navalny and his Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK) as well as independent news outlets use platforms like YouTube to disseminate investigations, social media is also increasingly rife with state-sponsored propaganda.

“There is a large, patriotic, conservative part and a small, proud, liberal opposition, but there is almost nothing in between,” says Russian independent journalist and media analyst Anna Kachkaeva of the Russian media landscape.

Yet Navalny's success in reaching a large audience is emblematic of a new type of media consumer in Russia, and a Moscow court's designation of his movement as “extremist” suggests the Kremlin sees Navalny and his followers as a serious threat. Social media has opened up avenues for independent journalism, providing a small but growing alternative to federal networks such as VGTRK (the All-Russian State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company), Channel One, or RT, and meeting a demand for truthful reporting.

According to the Levada-Center, only 16% of Russians trust official government information on the Covid-19 pandemic, for example.

“We saw a surge in audience last spring when we released an infographic on the coronavirus in Russia,” says Sergey Smirnov, editor in chief of the independent news outlet MediaZona, founded in 2014 by Maria Alyokhina and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, members of the Russian punk rock band Pussy Riot.

Over the last 20 years, the space for independent journalism in Russia has shrunk significantly, due to financial pressure, state media acquisitions, and assaults on journalists. Most outlets are either controlled by the government or have been sold to pro-Kremlin businessmen. Those resistant to state pressure are confronted with oppressive information laws. These policies not only target individual journalists but also international tech giants. In April, a Moscow court fined Twitter for its refusal to delete content encouraging the Russian public to take to the streets in support of Navalny. Facebook and Google are facing similar penalties.

The pressure on political opposition and independent press has intensified. Russia's Justice Ministry declared Latvia-based Meduza, one of the most popular online news outlets, a “foreign agent,” discrediting its operations and leading to severe financial losses. *VTimes*, an independent online business newspaper, recently stopped operations out of fear of prosecution after the outlet was added to that same list of “foreign

**PREVIOUS SPREAD:** Municipal workers paint over graffiti of imprisoned opposition leader Alexei Navalny reading “Hero of our time” in St. Petersburg  
**ABOVE:** Police in St. Petersburg arrest participants of the mass protest in support of opposition leader Alexei Navalny



**Alexei Navalny, who has led anti-corruption efforts in Russia, appears in court**

PREVIOUS SPREAD: IVAN PETROVIAP PHOTO LEFT: YURI KOCHETKOV/SHUTTERSTOCK



ABOVE: DAVID FRENKEL/COURTESY OF MEDIAZONA

agents.” Members of the student-run DOXA, the former magazine of Moscow’s Higher School of Economics, were placed under house arrest and banned from using the internet because they appeared in a video about how universities threatened to expel students if they participated in protests in support of Navalny.

The increased pressure has become the new reality for independent media in Russia. “All we can do is try to comply with all the requirements of the novel legislation,” Smirnov says. Compliance, however, can often be hard to define.

Last November, MediaZona released a story criticizing the Russian Federal Penitentiary Service (FSIN) for the limited data it released on Covid-19 in Russian prisons. Using open-source materials — as well as data from the human rights group Zona Prava — MediaZona exposed how the coronavirus spread through the penal system. In a formal request, the Russian media regulator Roskomnadzor asked the organization to remove the piece from its website. The site redacted every reference to FSIN in the text, but this did not satisfy the regulator, and Smirnov faced charges of spreading fake news. The case is currently pending.

## “We have been practically called ‘enemies of the state,’ What speakers, sources, or experts would want to talk to such a media outlet? Journalism is not a crime”

IVAN KOLPAKOV, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, MEDUZA

MediaZona’s original focus was on the criminal justice system in Russia, a cause embraced by Pussy Riot’s Alyokhina and Tolokonnikova. Independent Russian newsrooms often emerge as niche outlets directly from their founders’ activism.

“It’s startling for many Western journalists to see this ‘career trajectory’ that is quite standard in Russia,” says Aric Toler, a researcher at Bellingcat who focuses on investigating conflicts related to Eastern Europe. In the 19th and 20th centuries, Russian political commentators and philosophers found creative ways to circumvent censorship.

“Now journalists stand in a position somewhat similar to that in the intellectual history of Russia,” Toler adds.

Navalny and the FBK straddle a similar line between activism and journalism. Over the last few years, Navalny and his team have used journalistic techniques to expose corruption within the Russian government. Although Navalny’s work is politically motivated, the FBK has filled a gap created by the crackdown against independent newsrooms.

That crackdown has left only a handful of traditional media outlets able to preserve editorial independence.

Ekho Moskv, which started as a small radio station in the 1990s and is now partly controlled by the Russian government, remains openly critical. Unlike newer independent websites, Ekho Moskv is not only popular among younger people but is also one of the most reputable sources of information for broader audiences.

According to editor-in-chief Alexei Venediktov, the reason the radio station still exists is that the Russian government itself needs at least one reliable source of information to stay in the loop of what is actually happening in the country. Many young Russian journalists who choose to work independently start their careers at Ekho Moskv or Novaya Gazeta, a newspaper famous for its investigative journalism and whose reporters have been repeatedly attacked and sometimes murdered since its founding in 1993.

Among online independent media, some outlets, like Meduza, have determined the only way to work is outside Russia. During the pandemic, the site has provided in-depth coverage, often exposing flaws in official death toll statistics. But its designation as a “foreign agent” has already led to the loss of most of its advertisers. The law’s primary goal is to stigmatize and marginalize targeted outlets. Prior to Meduza, Russia had applied the same law to American outlets like Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Voice of America in what was considered a response to the U.S. Justice Department ordering RT to register as foreign agent.

Meduza is now required to inform readers — in the form of a label on each post, including advertisements — that the site distributes information as a foreign agent.

“We have been practically called ‘enemies of the state,’” says Meduza’s editor-in-chief, Ivan Kolpakov. “What speakers, sources, or experts would want to talk to such a media outlet? Journalism is not a crime.” The site has now turned to crowdfunding to continue operating.

Increasingly, smaller independent media struggle with legal pressure. “Our legislation is draconian. It is stupid, absurd!” says Roman Badanin, head of nonprofit investigative outlet Proekt.

Badanin launched Proekt in 2018 as an independent outlet focused on investigative journalism. It runs on public donations and Badanin compares its model to ProPublica. He has also covered the protests in support of Navalny, specifically incidents of police brutality.

Like other independent online outlets, Proekt’s audience is young, between 30 and 45, and between 80% and 85% of its traffic comes from social platforms. “It is paradoxical but both in open societies as well as in closed ones, all media equally depend on social media” to reach audiences, says Badanin.

Indeed, seeing the success of these new outlets, state-controlled media has launched sites like Octagon. Media that focus on discrediting stories from independent newsrooms, criticizing protestors, or vilifying the Ukrainian government. State broadcaster RT — initially created as part of the government’s effort to construct a positive image of Russia abroad — now also targets domestic audiences through social media, including on platforms like Telegram, where authorship and editorial control are harder to establish. RT’s coverage is often



GALA LATYGOVSKAYA/COURTESY OF MEDIAZONA

devoted to questioning the investigations published by Navalny and independent journalists.

There have also been rumors that a new state-sponsored, quasi-independent channel is in the works to counterbalance independent online TV channels like Dozhd. Launched in 2010 as a small private broadcaster with the slogan the “optimistic channel,” Dozhd’s programming encompasses everything from talk shows and panel discussions to exposés of state propaganda. The subscription-based channel is known for its live broadcasts of protests, which it has been covering since 2011.

Dozhd extensively covered recent demonstrations in support of Navalny, including reports from Moscow and St. Petersburg as well as from smaller cities across the country, like Krasnodar and Perm. The reports provided details about the actual number of protesters and interviews with participants that would never be shown on official TV.

“Whenever something bad happens, the audience grows,” says the channel’s chief editor, Tikhon Dzyadko.

Independent journalists in Russia are also at personal risk. In April, operatives of the FSB, the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) and the Investigative Committee of Russia searched the home of Roman Anin, editor-in-chief of the watchdog outlet Important Stories, or IStories, and the site’s newsroom. According to Anin, the raids were part of an investigation connected to a story he wrote in 2016 for Novaya Gazeta about the connection between the head of the Russian state-run energy company Rosneft, Igor Sechin, and the St. Princess Olga yacht. Anin has been questioned several times about the story and his work as a journalist, so far

only as a witness, although he and his lawyers fear he might be targeted for his journalism.

“Truthful media are listed as enemies,” Anin says.

IStories launched during the pandemic as a watchdog journalism site that not only focuses on big investigations but also covers local stories and provides professional training for independent journalists. In its first year, it released investigations into the leadership of the FSB and Putin’s former son-in-law, Kirill Shamalov. IStories also robustly covered Covid-19, detailing, for example, how Russian authorities unlawfully fined Moscow residents, even those who were ill in bed, for violating the lockdown.

Proekt, Dozhd, and IStories have since been designated as “foreign agents.” In February, MediaZona’s Smirnov was put under administrative arrest over a social media post in which he retweeted a joke pointing out the resemblance between himself and Russian rock star Dmitry Spirin. The original tweet featured a photo of the musician expressing his support for Navalny and featured the date and time of the protests. The police interpreted the retweet as a call to participate in an unauthorized demonstration, and Smirnov was found guilty of “violating the rules for holding public events.”

But such tactics can have unintended effects.

“When I was detained and then sentenced to 25 days” in administrative detention, Smirnov says, “we received a \$20,000 increase in monthly donations. These donations will help expand the newsroom.” ■

*Mykola Makhortykh contributed research and analysis to this article.*

**MediaZona employees, shown here at a Moscow bar in 2019, are being investigated after publishing a story exposing how Covid has run rampant in Russia’s penal system**



# AN UNFAIR ADVANTAGE?

**IN LITHUANIA, COMMERCIAL STATIONS ARGUE STATE-FINANCED BUDGETS FOR THE COUNTRY'S PUBLIC BROADCASTER CREATE A SKEWED COMPETITIVE LANDSCAPE BY ANN COOPER**

When the Soviet army moved to crush a powerful pro-independence movement in its republic of Lithuania in 1991, the military's list of targets included Lithuania's broadcast studios and TV transmission tower, which for months had defiantly sent out news free of Soviet censorship.

The bloodiest attack came when tanks rumbled up the TV tower hill in Vilnius, capital of the then-Soviet republic. Hundreds of unarmed civilians stood ground there, using their bodies to protect the besieged republic's most potent symbol of free speech.

Thirty years later, the TV tower hosts a small museum memorializing the 14 people who died defending the structure. And the broadcast studios, where Soviet soldiers once battered down doors to silence the calls for independence, now house the country's public broadcaster, Lithuanian National Radio and Television (LRT).

**A group of Lithuanians block a Russian tank outside of the LRT studios in Vilnius two days prior to an attack by Russian forces in January 1991**



more-generous (and pandemic-proof) annual budgets: an 11% increase in 2020 was followed by another rise of 15%, totaling around \$64 million, to fund LRT this year. “They did not have to think how to survive [the pandemic] and how, for example, to cut the wages of journalists,” says Džina Donauskaitė, director of the nonprofit Lithuanian Journalism Centre, which works

## RIVALS WARN THAT IF LRT BECOMES TOO DOMINANT, THE RELATIVELY RICH SELECTION OF JOURNALISM IN THIS SMALL COUNTRY WILL WITHER AWAY

with both public and private media. Instead, LRT could create new pandemic-era programming, such as educational shows for children in virus lockdown and Sunday worship services on TV, after Covid forced church closures in the very Catholic country. This year’s budget increase will help LRT open a bureau in Brussels to cover the EU, a rare foreign venture for Lithuanian media.

LRT “is having something of a golden moment” says Ruslanas Irzikevicius, who edits the English version of 15min, Lithuania’s second most widely read news portal. The public broadcaster’s director general, Monika Garbačiauskaitė-Budrienė, who came to LRT after years as editor of Lithuania’s number one portal, Delfi, “has done a fantastic job with online,” Irzikevicius notes. “Overall, maybe she’s doing too good a job,” he says. “There has to be some kind of balance.”

“Balance” is a mantra repeated frequently by commercial rivals, who warn that if LRT becomes too dominant, the relatively rich selection of journalism in this small country — from traditional broadcast news and digital-first sites to nonprofit longform storytelling and YouTube news channels — will wither away. That may be particularly alarming for those who remember the Soviet era, when there was no media competition, only the censored propaganda of the Communist Party.

Soviet Lithuania’s brief defiance of that censorship regime led to the 1991 attack on its TV tower, but less than a year later the Soviet Union collapsed. Suddenly Lithuania and the 14 other Soviet republics were independent countries, free to build new, uncensored media systems.

After decades of Soviet rule, though, there were no traditions of ethical journalism and few legitimate revenue sources. A kind of “wild capitalism” ruled Lithuania’s post-Soviet media market, says journalist Rolandas Barysas, who covered the early years of independence for Reuters. A common practice was to run “news” stories paid for by businessmen or politicians. Blackmail was another technique for raising revenues: Buy ads with us, or we’ll print something scurrilous about you.

In 2007, citing the continuing shakedown practices in some newsrooms, Politico Europe proclaimed “Lithuanian newspapers in need of a make

The 30th anniversary of the Soviet army attack was widely commemorated on Jan. 13, with videos, slide shows, and “I remember” features published throughout the public and private media that today serve Lithuania’s 2.8 million people. The independent accountability reporting they provide is a little-noticed post-Cold War success, enabled by a press freedom climate ranked higher than the U.K., France, or the U.S. The Reporters

Without Borders Press Freedom Index puts Lithuania 28th out of 180 countries; of the 15 former Soviet republics, only fellow Baltic states Estonia and Latvia rate higher.

But in those broadcast studios once targeted by the Soviet military, journalists are under attack again. This time it’s not tanks, or soldiers, or even politicians

**LRT has flourished during the tenure of director general Monika Garbačiauskaitė-Budrienė, but commercial rivals worry that the state-funded outlet has become too dominant**

leading the charge. Instead, it’s LRT’s commercial competitors, who have cried “unfair” in a formal complaint asking for a European Union order to curb the public broadcaster’s state-financed budget and online news operation.

Public funding of broadcasting is a cherished cornerstone of European democracies. Across the continent, public radio and TV enjoyed government-approved monopolies on the airwaves for decades, in exchange for fulfilling mandates like the BBC’s — to “inform, educate, and entertain.” Even after commercial competitors were allowed in the 1980s, European governments have continued to collect special fees or grant government funds for public media, citing goals of promoting civil discourse, national unity and independent, trustworthy reporting.

But in this digital age, commercial competitors to the BBC and publicly funded outlets in Germany, Ireland, Finland, and elsewhere have demanded a European re-

think, in particular challenging public media expansions in online news. Lithuania, which joined the EU in 2004, entered that debate last June, when several leading commercial media outlets filed a 46-page complaint with the EU’s executive arm, the European Commission.

Their complaint argues that the pandemic has firmly underscored the need for change. Ad revenue losses of 50% or more, due to Covid economics, forced many commercial newsrooms to furlough journalists or use pay cuts or layoffs to stay afloat.

While those newsrooms tightened belts, the pandemic’s financial turmoil didn’t touch LRT or its three TV channels, three radio stations, and online news sites in Lithuanian, Russian, and English. LRT is funded by fixed percentages of personal income and excise tax revenues, a formula designed by lawmakers to provide stable annual budgets shielded from political influence. For several years, the formula has translated into ever

PREVIOUS SPREAD: PETER ANDREWS/REUTERS  
ABOVE: COURTESY OF DELFI/MINDAUGAS AZUŠILIS

over.” An exception, according to Politico, was Verslo žinios, a business paper with an “impeccable reputation” that was founded with financial support from Sweden’s Bonnier media group.

Bonnier investments in Lithuania and its Baltic neighbors Latvia and Estonia brought “values, mission to serve society, objectiveness, and independence” to the region’s media, says Barysas, who became Bonnier’s partner at Verslo žinios. Barysas, who still edits the paper, says it’s been a training ground for young reporters, some of whom have gone on to become leaders in other Lithuanian newsrooms.

One of those leaders is Garbačiauskaitė-Budrienė, the current LRT director general, who was just 19 when she became a journalist in the post-Soviet era. After a few years at Verslo žinios, she joined a 2000 startup called Delfi, an internet service provider that initially offered customers more games and entertainment than news.

Over time, and eventually under Garbačiauskaitė-Budrienė’s leadership as editor in chief, Delfi revolutionized Lithuanian journalism, luring readers and advertisers online with a robust mix of news and features, updated throughout the day and, unlike its print competitors, free of charge. Delfi hastened the decline of Soviet-vintage newspapers, which were slow to build an internet presence. Of the handful of national papers that remain today, none publishes a daily print edition. And Delfi continues

## WE LIVE IN THE 21ST CENTURY, AND THERE ARE NO MORE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN DIFFERENT MEDIA PLATFORMS

MONIKA GARBACIAUSKAITE-BUDRIENE, LRT

to lead the far more popular online market for news.

Three years ago, Garbačiauskaitė-Budrienė moved from commercial media to LRT. As leader of the public broadcaster, she moved swiftly to create an investigative reporting desk and to fend off political challenges to LRT’s independence. (A new management board proposed by populist government leaders in 2019 was not approved, nor did the same politicians succeed with a court challenge to LRT’s funding.)

Even commercial media critics say LRT’s journalism has remained strong under Garbačiauskaitė-Budrienė, who has used her budget and staff — the largest in Lithuanian media — to mount ambitious coverage of major events, such as national elections and Pope Francis’s 2018 visit to Lithuania.

But commercial rivals balked when that budget enabled LRT to win air rights for this season’s EuroLeague basketball games. In the past, the games aired behind a paywall on commercial TV; LRT is now showing many of them for free (but selling sponsorships, similar to PBS underwriting, which further incensed commercial rivals).

“Basketball is a religion here in Lithuania,” says Delfi

CEO Vytautas Benokraitis, who was Garbačiauskaitė-Budrienė’s boss when she was editor in chief at Delfi. Benokraitis, who made a losing bid for the EuroLeague season, argues that such popular, commercially lucrative programming doesn’t belong on a channel that’s funded by taxpayers. “Why should the state invest in a product that could be fully covered by a commercial player?” he asks.

That’s one of the arguments made in the commercial media complaint to the European Commission. Any decision could be years away, and any EC call for change would still require action by Lithuania’s government.

But past EC decisions have shown some sympathy for commercial media, in particular challenges to a public broadcaster’s online expansions. Many European countries now impose very specific restrictions. In the French-speaking part of Belgium, for example, the public broadcaster can only post election opinion polls online if the results have already been discussed on its radio or TV channels, while German and Austrian public media can put their sports videos online for no more than 24 hours. (Cultural programming can stay posted indefinitely.)

Such piecemeal restrictions don’t really satisfy the fundamental complaint of Lithuania’s commercial media: that the public broadcaster should focus on audio and video, using online and mobile platforms largely as a repository for that broadcast work.

From the day she arrived at LRT in 2018, though, Garbačiauskaitė-Budrienė has rejected that as an outdated view.

“We live in the 21st century, and there are no more boundaries between different media platforms,” she said in an early interview with her old employer, Verslo žinios. “Content must reach the user through the most convenient channels.”

At the time, LRT’s online presence barely registered in audience surveys. Three years on, it now regularly ranks as Lithuania’s fifth-most visited news portal — thanks to more frequent news updates, mobile push notifications, and new, digital-only content, like a documentary series that has tackled sensitive topics such as gay parenting and abortion.

Garbačiauskaitė-Budrienė sees these changes as essential, if LRT is to be relevant for younger audiences, whose preferred platforms are online and mobile. During an interview on Zoom, she holds up her cell phone to the computer camera. “The world is going in a different direction, and everything is here,” she says. “Your news is here.”

The competition for those digital audiences is fierce, and Garbačiauskaitė-Budrienė’s former newsroom, Delfi, is still winning it, with an editorial mix described by The Fix, a European media review, as “a supermarket.” Some of Delfi’s recent serious journalism included a deep-dive investigation of Russian disinformation and an expose of an elaborate fraud operation run from a Lithuanian prison. Covid updates dominate the home page, though they bump up against other features begging for clicks; on one late January day, the clickbait included horoscopes, a guide to cleaning your toilet, and



an article speculating that actress Demi Moore’s new look was caused by a bad facelift.

Clickbait is a common target of Delfi reader complaints, as is the vitriol posted anonymously in some comment sections. But as it celebrates its 21st anniversary this year, Delfi remains an innovator. It’s a party to the complaint against LRT, but the company managed to avoid pandemic-related staff cuts last year thanks in part to its growing online video programming and its pioneering paywall for premium content, according to company CEO Benokraitis.

Delfi’s main online rival, 15min, very publicly eliminated anonymous comments a few years ago in an “internet hygiene” campaign. 15min has also sought to distinguish itself by emphasizing political analysis and investigative reporting, like its work uncovering alleged corrupt ties between Lithuanian business conglomerate MG Baltic and prominent politicians. Several 15min journalists have left in recent months, though, in a bitter dispute over editorial direction with the top manager, chosen under the leadership of the politically conservative Estonian businessman who owns 15min’s parent company. Among those departing were the site’s top editor and the last two reporters in 15min’s investigative unit.

That loss leaves LRT as the only major newsroom with a full-time investigative staff — and with the budget to withstand legal challenges to its investigations, says Donauskaitė, the director of the Lithuanian Journalism Centre. “You have to have more resources allocated for that,” she says, noting that LRT is still in court over an investigation that exposed corrupt campaign contributions to a mayoral candidate in the seaport city of Klaipėda; the candidate lost. Such reporting poses financial risks, “and public broadcasting can afford to do

**Delfi, Lithuania’s number one portal, has built a robust mix of news and features, including an investigative series on Andrius Raziūnas (above), who was charged on multiple accounts of fraud**

that. Commercial media, not always,” says Donauskaitė.

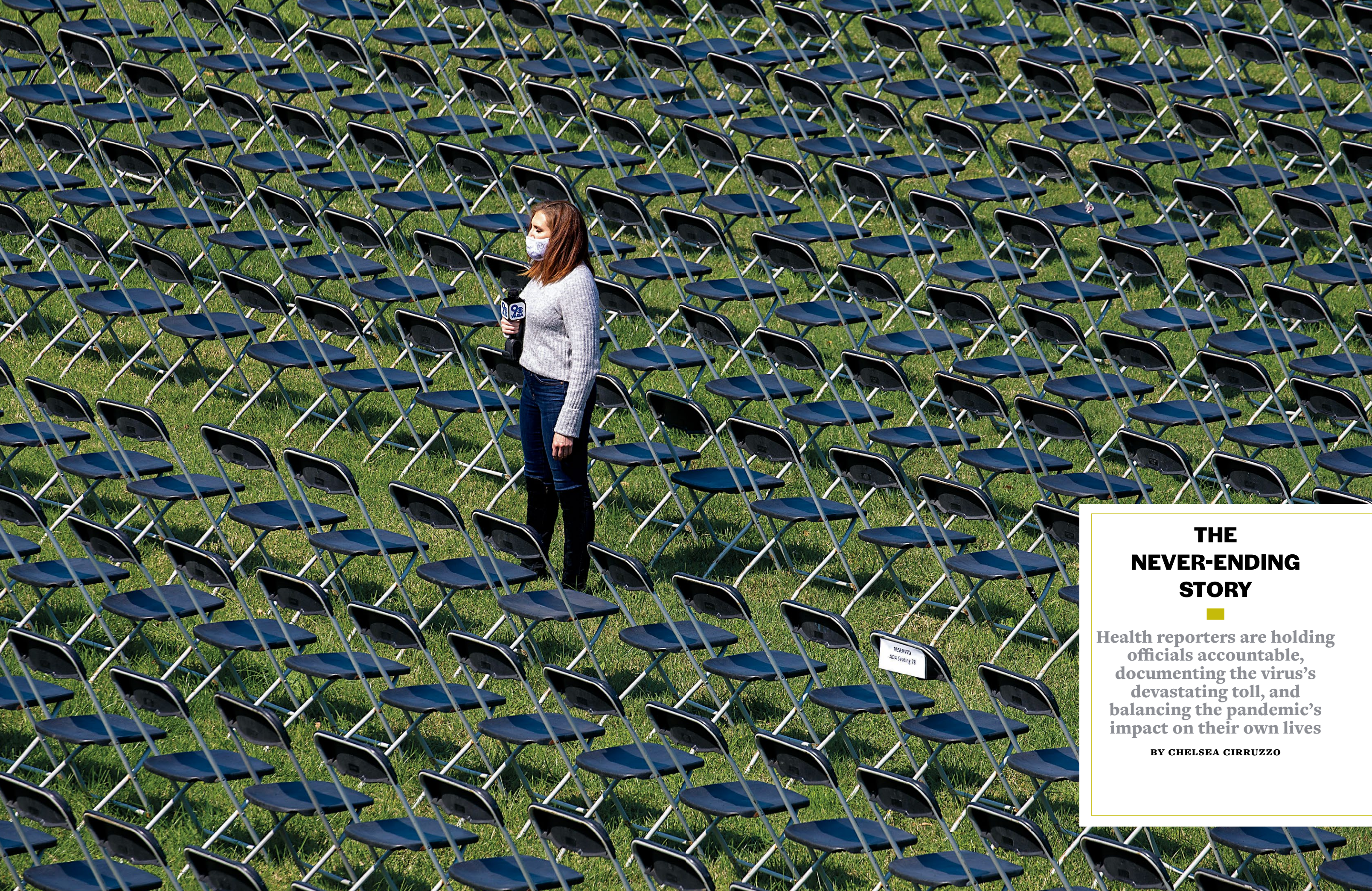
The fight between LRT and commercial rivals makes Lithuania’s news community uncomfortable, not least because it sometimes resembles a battle of personalities more than policy — “a catfight,” as one journalist described it.

Several journalists said they wished commercial media and LRT could have found a way to discuss their differences without the formal complaint to the EC. “Our fight with the national broadcaster is really bad for our image, for all journalism,” Delfi CEO Benokraitis acknowledges.

But without a fight, he warns, Lithuania could lose the democracy and free press that it fought so hard for 30 years ago. Poland is the cautionary example that some point to, as what could happen if commercial media grows too weak. In Poland, a strong, independent public broadcaster had few commercial rivals when a populist government took office in 2015. That government has purged the public broadcaster’s professional journalists, replacing them with party loyalists who have turned the newsroom from a public service entity into a state-controlled propaganda mouthpiece, with only weak alternative media voices.

Such a scenario seems a remote possibility in Lithuania’s current political climate. National pride in its role in speeding the Soviet collapse remains high. And last October’s national elections brought to power a governing coalition that recently proclaimed, “The quality of democracy requires a strong and independent news media,” a statement welcomed by journalists.

That’s great, says Ruslanas Irzikevicius, the editor at 15min English. But “You never know what might happen in the next election.” ■



## THE NEVER-ENDING STORY

Health reporters are holding officials accountable, documenting the virus's devastating toll, and balancing the pandemic's impact on their own lives

BY CHELSEA CIRRUZZO



**FOR MANY HEALTH REPORTERS**, reporting

on the coronavirus started long before most Americans realized the devastating impact it would have on their daily lives. Declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020, Covid-19 has killed more than 680,000 U.S. citizens and infected more than 42 million.

For Lena H. Sun, a national health reporter for The Washington Post, reporting on the virus began on Jan. 8, 2020. “An outbreak of an unidentified and possibly new viral disease in central China is prompting officials across Asia to take heightened precautions ahead of the busy Lunar New Year travel season,” she wrote in a co-bylined piece with Washington Post China correspondent Gerry Shih. Now, more than a year later, she is still on the story, sometimes writing several stories a day to cover all the new developments.

**PREVIOUS SPREAD:**  
A reporter works among empty chairs on display to represent the 200,000 lives lost to Covid-19 at The Ellipse in Washington, D.C., in Oct. 2020

Sun, a longtime health care reporter, can rattle off an impressive list of massive health events she’s covered: fungal meningitis, Ebola, Zika, you name it. But the Covid-19 pandemic has eclipsed it all, she says: “There’s been a lot of public health issues but, obviously, nothing like this pandemic.”

As health reporters like Sun surpass one year of reporting on the pandemic, their role has become a more important public service than ever. Some, including those at Politico, The Atlantic, and CNN, were recently honored for their coverage with George Polk Awards. Meanwhile, both national and local outlets have launched text message services to share information, fielded calls by confused seniors seeking vaccines, held live Q&As, and shared maps and lists with information on how to access testing.

Not only are health reporters tasked with communicating emerging public health guidance, they are also holding officials accountable for their responses, documenting the devastating human toll of the virus, and balancing the virus’ impact on their own lives.

Laura Helmuth, now editor-in-chief of Scientific American, was Sun’s colleague at The Washington Post at the start of the pandemic. While she also has a considerable public health reporting background and knew Covid-19 was spiraling into a pandemic by February, the virus has still brought a lot of surprises. “One of the biggest challenges for this pandemic has been that the science is moving so quickly,” she says. And that means guidance on how best to protect yourself has been rapidly changing, too.

That marked one of the first and ongoing challenges for health reporters during the pandemic: Explaining to audiences not just the science but explaining why guidance had suddenly changed.

Early on, federal guidance told people to simply wash their hands frequently to protect themselves and that they wouldn’t need to wear face masks. Then, new research came out that the virus could be spread asymptotically. The public was given a new order: Mask up. However, President Donald Trump continued to cast doubt on the science by attacking public health experts, including top infectious disease expert Dr. Anthony Fauci, for initially saying the public didn’t need to wear masks.

The confusion that can result from changing information has to do with anchoring bias, which occurs when

**“You have to kind of both say, ‘Okay, here’s the new thing we know, and this old thing we thought we knew ... was actually not correct’”**

**LAURA HELMUTH**  
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN

PREVIOUS SPREAD: TASOS KATOFODIS/GETTY IMAGES

ABOVE: LUKE SHARRETT/GETTY IMAGES  
BOTTOM: CHRIS BERGIN/GETTY IMAGES

people tend to remember the first thing they’ve learned about something. People “fall into a judgment error ... where we give too much credit to the initial piece of information we received on a topic and perceive the rest of the information through the filter of that initial impression,” Gleb Tsipursky wrote in Scientific American. For example, a person buying a car may research the average price and then jump on the first offer that resembles that average price, rather than considering other factors relevant for buying a car, such as mileage and the possibility that there’s a cheaper vehicle of equal value. During the pandemic, Tsipursky explains, people given guidance to not wear masks are likely to disregard new guidance on mask wearing, especially when they don’t see authority figures following it.

“We were legitimately reporting on the best available evidence at the time,” Helmuth says. “You have to kind of both say, ‘Okay, here’s the new thing we know, and this old thing we thought we knew ... was actually not correct.’” To maintain trust with readers, Helmuth says being frank with them and debunking misinformation is key.

When it comes to vaccines, the rapid pace at which new information is coming out — from the speed at which new vaccines are approved to varying estimates on their safety and efficacy — has given way to confusion, hesitancy, and even dangerous instances of misinformation. One of the ways to debunk misinformation is by answering reader questions explicitly and in a consumer-friendly way.

In Florida, one reporter did just that by taking hundreds of calls from confused seniors and telling them what she knew about signing up for a vaccine appointment. In Texas, Gwendolyn Wu, a health care reporter for the Houston Chronicle, helps write a weekly Covid-19 Help Desk column where she answers four to five reader questions a week with insight from local public health experts.

“The thing that we, as health reporters, are still trying to figure out is how to deliver information in a way where people see it and they know the context behind it,” Wu says.

Answering questions about why a vaccine isn’t available is part of the health reporter’s job, too. “I’m seeing more and stronger reporting now about inequities in vaccine distribution than I did early on with deaths and testing,” says Aneri Pattani, a health reporter with Kaiser Health News. “It’s just gotten stronger and stronger as journalists have some time.”

Kaiser Health News recently published a piece reveal-

**Dr. Valerie Bryones-Prior, (top) and Tony Sizemore (bottom) were among the many people featured in a Washington Post series on the effects of the pandemic on daily life**





ing how vaccine appointment websites violate federal law and make it difficult for blind people to use them. In Washington, D.C., Washington City Paper looked at how a confusing online sign-up system and transportation issues prevented some Black seniors from signing up.

Holding public officials accountable can give readers something actionable to take away from stories rather than despair, says Caroline Chen, a health reporter at ProPublica. She calls out officials who distort numbers to weave their own narratives and explains how policies impact vulnerable frontline workers. In late March 2020, Chen was part of a team of reporters who revealed how the CDC fumbled its initial communication with health officials on the severity of the virus. “To show [readers] how the data points us to responsibility — for our leaders, certainly, but often, for every individual as well,” Chen writes in an email.

For Sun at The Washington Post, the watchdog role feels personal: Her mom died of Covid-19 last year.

“It was especially hard to be covering a disease that then infected somebody in my family and killed them,” Sun says. In some ways, she feels even more responsible for making sure everything she reports is as accurate as possible and to hold the government accountable for botched public health messaging and efforts. “One of the biggest lessons to learn from this is the importance

**“It was especially hard to be covering a disease that infected somebody in my family and killed them”**

**LENA H. SUN**  
HEALTH REPORTER, THE WASHINGTON POST

of consistent public health messaging,” Sun says.

For health reporters, that meant doing something that isn’t typically their job: Calling out public officials, particularly Trump, for lying, then sharing the real information. The Atlantic compiled a list in November that included every false coronavirus claim by Trump throughout 2020 and then debunked it. A Lancet Commission report published in February said the U.S. could have averted 40% of its Covid-19 deaths and blamed the Trump administration’s response to the pandemic as well as the administration’s other policies, such as its weakening of health insurance coverage under the Affordable Care Act, as contributing factors.

As the national death toll of the coronavirus has crested half a million, Helmuth says it’s important for reporters to not lose sight of those names and faces: “It’s easy to get kind of overwhelmed and focus on the numbers. ... But it’s just really important to keep showing how horribly this robs people of their loved ones, of their health.”

One Washington Post reporter allows those people to speak for themselves. National reporter Eli Saslow is

the reporter behind “Voices of the Pandemic,” an oral history of those impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, which has featured a provider who has seen 27 people die of Covid-19 and a woman who has not yet fully recovered after becoming infected. CNN asks people to submit the stories of their lost loved ones and then shares some of them on air.

Health reporters are no exception to facing the impacts of the pandemic. While many reporters might remember the J-school mantra, “Don’t insert yourself into the story,” that, for many, may become impossible during a pandemic. Asian-American reporters, including Chen, have faced racist attacks, including a number of “unprintable racist emails and DMs,” she says. During his presidency, Trump often used the racist moniker “Chinese virus” to refer to the coronavirus. Between March 19 and Aug. 5, 2020, the Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council said it received more than 2,500 reports of anti-Asian discrimination, including verbal and physical harassment.

“I am well aware that racism is alive and well in the U.S., but it is sad to see the unvarnished anger and hatred,” Chen says. In her reporting, Chen has heard grief, frustration, anger, demoralization, and fear from the people she has interviewed. “I have to remind myself that it’s not my job to carry their emotions for them and there’s often only so much I can do.”

In these instances, it’s beneficial for reporters to take a step back and breathe a little, either by closing their computers or even taking a vacation or leave. For Chen, when her loved ones tell her they can tell she is stressed, she takes a break. “If I take a week, two weeks off, nobody’s going to miss me,” she says. “We can cover for each other.”

For Pattani at Kaiser Health News, the personal and painful impacts of the pandemic have fed into her reporting. In October, she realized that the stress of the pandemic itself was exacerbating her own chronic health issues. “That led me to think about, ‘Is this happening to other people?’” She ended up writing about it, describing migraines, teeth grinding and hair loss as symptoms of severe stress and offering tips from experts on how to reduce stress. She received messages from people all over the country empathizing with her. “It was kind of the silver lining of recognizing something that was more universal than just my personal experience,” Pattani says.

But Pattani’s experience underscores the detrimental impacts that stress has on reporters. When asked what they do for self-care, nearly every health reporter interviewed said something along the lines of, “I’m still working on it.” Some mentioned pets, family, exercise, or picking up hobbies as ways to relieve stress.

That’s how Marlene Harris-Taylor, managing producer for health news at northeast Ohio’s Ideastream, a public media service organization consisting of several television and radio channels, takes care of herself — working out and teaching herself piano, something she’s always wanted to learn. Other ways reporters can take care of themselves include setting clear



MARLENE HARRIS-TAYLOR/COURTESY OF IDEASTREAM PUBLIC MEDIA

boundaries between work and home, even when they work from home. That could mean not sending emails past work hours, for example. Additionally, reporters can lean on their communities, including faith communities, or their loved ones to hold them accountable when their stress levels rise and they need a break. Many therapists have also gone virtual during the pandemic, making them easier to access. The Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma offers a number of resources for reporters struggling as they cover the pandemic.

Harris-Taylor also warns that there’s a mental health crisis underneath the pandemic, something we may continue to see even beyond its official end.

Four in ten adults have reported symptoms of anxiety or depressive disorder during the pandemic, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation, up from one in ten adults who reported these symptoms between January and June 2019. A small survey done by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism in June of journalists from international news organizations working on stories around the pandemic found that 70% reported psychological distress. In another survey, by the International Center for Journalists and Columbia’s Tow Center for Digital Journalism, more than 1,000 English-speaking journalists from 125 countries were asked to rank what factors they found the most professionally difficult during the pandemic;

**Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority member Mittie Davis Jones distributes masks, goodie bags, and voter education information in Sept. 2020**

70% put the psychological and emotional impacts of dealing with the Covid-19 crisis at the top.

Recovery may take a while and Harris-Taylor urges other reporters to get started now. “People really have to address their own stress as much as possible and understand that we’re all in the middle of a situation that’s causing chronic stress,” she says. “Chronic stress really does impact the cortisol levels, which can have long term implications.”

With a long road of recovery ahead, health reporters say news outlets must continue to utilize them, invest in them, and integrate them across the newsroom. Helmuth, who became editor-in-chief of Scientific American in April 2020, says that includes helping health reporters develop specific skill sets, sending them to workshops, and allowing them to build their networks. For example, the Association of Health Care Journalists offers grant opportunities for reporting projects as well as workshops that have lately centered on helping reporters gather better data on the pandemic or write about the science behind the coronavirus. Helmuth also wrote a tipsheet for reporters covering the pandemic in early March 2020.

That also means continuing the focus on how the pandemic has deepened inequities and highlighted racism in health, such as when wealthy white Los Angeles residents snapped up vaccine appointments meant for Black and Latino communities. “Health and science are important on their own,” Helmuth says. “And the things that we cover will be true and relevant a week from now, whereas a lot of the daily politics news really won’t.” ■

1962

**Ian Menzies**, a longtime Boston Globe reporter, editor and columnist, died on June 1, 2021, in Hingham Massachusetts. He was 101.

1965

**A. W. Maldonado** is the author of “Boom and Bust in Puerto Rico: How Politics Destroyed an Economic Miracle,” published in August (University of Notre Dame Press).

1975

**John N. Maclean**’s new book, “Home Waters: A Chronicle of Family and a River” (Custom House, June 2021), traces his family ties with Montana’s Blackfoot River.

1977

**Paul Solman** was part of the PBS NewsHour team that won a Peabody Award for “Making Sense: The Victims of the COVID Economy.”

**Cassandra Tate** died on June 10, 2021, in Seattle, Washington, at the age of 77. A journalist, historian and author, she worked as a reporter for newspapers in the Pacific Northwest.

1978

**Kenneth Freed**, a former editor and reporter for The Associated Press, the Los Angeles Times and the Omaha World-Herald, died on June 7, 2021.

1983

**Eli Reed** won the Nieman Foundation’s 2021 I.F. Stone Medal for Journalistic Independence, recognized for work that documents racism and human suffering.

1984

**Derrick Z. Jackson** won a Scripps Howard award for excellence in opinion writing for his Covid-19 commentaries, published by the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) and Grist.org.

**Jan Jarboe Russell**’s latest book is “Eleanor in the Village: Eleanor Roosevelt’s Search for Freedom and Identity in New York’s Greenwich Village” (Scribner, March 2021).

1988

**Gene Robinson**, columnist for The Washington Post and a political analyst at MSNBC, has won the Missouri Honor Medal for Distinguished Service from the Missouri School of Journalism.

1990

**Paolo Valentino**, a columnist and correspondent for Italy’s Corriere della Sera, is the author of “L’età di Merkel,” an examination of long-serving German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s political impact (Marsilio, August 2021).

1995

**Michael Riley**, president, CEO and editor-in-chief at the Chronicle of Higher Education, has been inducted into Wake Forest Writers Hall of Fame.

2000

**Michael Paul Williams** won this year’s Pulitzer Prize for commentary for his columns at the Richmond Times-Dispatch about the complicated process of dismantling the city’s statues of Civil War generals.

2003

**Susan Smith Richardson** has been named the inaugural Ida B. Wells Professor in Journalism at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication.

2005

**Roza Eftekhari** died on July 20, 2021, in Laguna Niguel, California, at age 60. She had served as a senior director for programs at the Institute for War & Peace Reporting in Washington, D.C., for 12 years.

2006

**Mary C. Curtis**, a CQ Roll Call columnist and host of “Equal Time with Mary C. Curtis,” won a 2021 Association for Women in Communications Clarion Award for her columns and was a finalist in the podcast category.

2009

**Margie Mason**, an investigative reporter for the AP, won several awards for a series that exposed widespread labor abuses in the palm oil industry in Asia, including the 2021 Worth Bingham Prize for Investigative Journalism.

**Guy Raz** is co-author of “The How & Wow

of the Human Body: From Your Tongue to Your Toes and All the Guts in Between!” (Clarion Books, March 2021).

2010

**Hopewell Chin’ono** won Gatefield’s People Journalism Prize for Africa 2020 for his investigation into corruption related to Covid-19 procurement in Zimbabwe.

**Alissa Quart** and her colleagues at the Economic Hardship Reporting Project won a 2021 American Journalism Online Award from NYU’s Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute, which named the site the best nontraditional news source of the year.

2011

**Helen Branswell**, a senior writer at STAT covering infectious diseases and global health, was a Pulitzer Prize finalist in the breaking news category for Covid-19 coverage.

2013

**Jen Balderama McDonald** has joined The Washington Post’s Opinions section as an op-ed editor.

**Laura Wides-Muñoz** is the new deputy editor of the Los Angeles Times’ Washington Bureau.

2014

**Issac Bailey** won a Mirror Award in the commentary category for three of his Nieman Reports opinion columns.

2016

**Wendi C. Thomas**, editor and publisher of MLK50, has been named to Memphis Business Journal’s 2021 Power 100 list.

2017

**Jassim Ahmad**, previously head of product innovation at the BBC, is now the principal product manager at Spotify in London.

**Jeneé Osterheldt**, a Boston Globe columnist, has won the Burl Osborne Editorial and Opinion Award for her work exploring race in America.

2018

**Tristan Ahtone** and his colleagues at High Country News won IRE and Polk awards for their investigation into how land-grant universities expropriated indigenous land. Ahtone is now editor-in-chief at The Texas Observer.

“A woman ahead of her time”  
Remembering  
Dr. Nancy Giles, who  
welcomed 11 classes of  
Nieman Fellows



**D**r. Nancy Giles, a dedicated psychologist and wife of former Nieman curator Bob Giles, died in Michigan on July 7, 2021, at the age of 82.

Known for her kindness, empathy, sharp mind, and joyful spirit, Nancy helped welcome each new class to the Harvard campus during Bob’s tenure as curator, which ran from 2000 to 2011. Nancy and Bob also regularly invited fellows and staff into their Cambridge home, building strong bonds that many fellows remember as an integral and treasured part of their fellowship.

Recalling their time at Harvard, Bob said, “Nancy loved being in the company of the Nieman Fellows. It was the happiest time of her life.”

As a testament to the many lives she touched within the Nieman community, dozens of fellows have shared memories of her in social posts, many describing her warmth, grace and thoughtfulness as well as her sage advice and support, which she was always quick to offer.

“Nancy was a woman ahead of her time,” recalls Stefanie Friedhoff, NF ‘01. “For more than a decade at Lippmann

House, Nancy was one of the souls of the fellowship, the person who would break the ice, who asked the difficult questions, who tended to fellows, affiliates, and the fellowship community, and who, both in professional and personal ways, kept many of us an essential bit saner.”

Born Nancy May Morgan in Cleveland in 1938, she graduated from Ohio Wesleyan University in 1960 with a degree in politics and government. She later earned a master’s degree in school and child clinical psychology from the University of Akron and a doctoral degree in psychology from the University of Rochester.

During her career as a psychologist, she often helped clients who were dealing with trauma.

Wherever she went, Nancy easily made friends, established meaningful roots in the local community and found new ways to volunteer her skills and time. Civil rights, politics, and journalism were among the many causes and issues she cared deeply about.

“She’d seek you out at a party and, with a broad smile, lean over, and say, ‘So, how ya doin’, kiddo?’ And she really wanted to know,” remembers Lisa Mullins, NF ‘10. “Only after

my Nieman year ended did I realize what a meaningful bond she created with scores of fellows and affiliates, especially those who felt adrift.”

In 2010, Ohio Wesleyan recognized her as “an exemplary volunteer” and for her dedication to her alma mater. At that time, she worked with groups including the American Red Cross, the Junior League, and OWU alumni groups. In recent years, she continued to volunteer at the Probate Court and other places in Traverse City, Michigan, where she and Bob had moved after leaving Cambridge.

In addition to Bob, she is survived by her children, David, Megan Giles Cooney and Rob; and four grandchildren. ■

**Emily Drefuss** is part of the team at Harvard’s Shorenstein Center running a new program to help newsrooms fight misinformation and media manipulation.

**Sipho Kings** co-founded and is editorial director of The Continent, a new weekly that showcases the best reporting from journalists across Africa.

**Lisa Lerer** has been promoted to national political correspondent at The New York Times. She previously served as the lead writer for the “On Politics” newsletter.

2019

**Christina Andreasen** is the strategic press

and communications adviser for Denmark’s consulate general in New York City.

2020

**Todd Wallack** has joined WBUR as deputy managing editor in the newsroom. He was previously an investigative reporter on the Boston Globe Spotlight Team.

2021

**John Archibald** published his memoir “Shaking the Gates of Hell: A Search for Family and Truth in the Wake of the Civil Rights Revolution” (Knopf, March 2021).

**Amber Payne** is co-editor in chief of The Emancipator, a project that aims to

reframe the national conversation on racial justice.

2022

**Deb Pastner**, director of photo and multimedia at the Star Tribune in Minneapolis, is part of the team that won the Pulitzer Prize for breaking news for coverage of George Floyd’s death.

**Natalia Viana**, co-founder and executive director of Agência Pública, is president of the Brazilian Digital Journalism Association and published “Dano Colateral” (Grupo Companhia das Letras, July 2021), examining how the military has regained prominence in Brazilian politics. ■

LISA ABITTOLE

## Meet the 2022 Nieman Fellows

The Nieman Foundation for Journalism has selected 22 journalists from across the globe for its 84th class of fellows. The journalists will study at Harvard University during the 2021-22 academic year and focus their research on some of the most urgent issues facing the news industry, from diminished trust and far-right movements to innovations in audience growth and virtual reality.

### Caelainn Barr (Ireland)



Caelainn Barr, the data projects editor at The Guardian in London, is studying how missing data in reporting can perpetuate inequality and underrepresentation in journalism. She will examine how news organizations can build and better use data to report on marginalized communities.

### Bill Barrow (U.S.)



Bill Barrow, an Atlanta-based national political reporter for The Associated Press, is examining the intersection of movement and party politics in the United States, focusing on the institutional structures and prevailing social dynamics that are reshaping Democratic and Republican alliances in the early 21st century.

### Jorge Caraballo Cordovez (Colombia)



Jorge Caraballo Cordovez, growth editor at “Radio Ambulante,” NPR’s only podcast in Spanish, is developing a toolkit for narrative journalism podcasts in Latin America, seeking to leverage the

power of audio storytelling to strengthen community connections.

### Choy Yuk-ling (Bao Choy) (Hong Kong SAR, China)



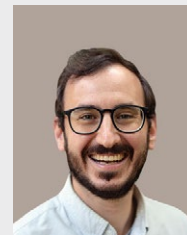
Choy Yuk-ling, an investigative journalist and video producer, is studying how independent and investigative news outlets can evolve in order to survive the financial, legal, and political roadblocks set up by authoritarian governments.

### Pranav Dixit (India)



Pranav Dixit, a New Delhi-based technology correspondent for BuzzFeed News, is examining the evolution of the American tech press and what lessons it offers for global media, and how newsrooms in developing countries can more effectively cover the intersection of technology, culture, and democracy.

### Reuben Fischer-Baum (U.S.)



Reuben Fischer-Baum, a graphics editor at The Washington Post who leads a team of graphics reporters focused on visual stories about business and technology, is collecting lessons from the field to explore how to make interactive journalism more accessible to small newsrooms and help reproduce the audience growth that major news organizations have seen with this form of storytelling.

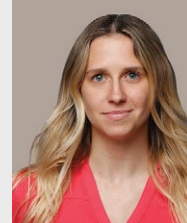
### Fu Ting (China)

Fu Ting, an Associated Press reporter based in Thailand, is researching China’s



global expansion, domestic living standards, and ongoing brain drain in the face of an economic slowdown that followed years of rapid growth. She is also examining how the country and the wider world are addressing the downturn and the resulting social challenges.

### Sammy Jo Hester (U.S.)



Sammy Jo Hester, the lead photo editor for sports at the Los Angeles Times, is examining the intersection of gender and athletics, with a focus on the media’s role in perpetuating the ways women are seen and represented in athletics.

### Selase Kove-Seyram (Ghana)



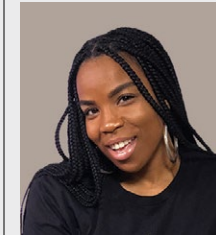
Selase Kove-Seyram, a digital media producer and head of digital strategy for the Tiger Eye Social Foundation, a media nonprofit, is studying how collaborative efforts to produce public service journalism could enhance professionalism, fight misinformation, and help restore public trust in journalism in West Africa.

### Patricia Laya (Venezuela/Spain)



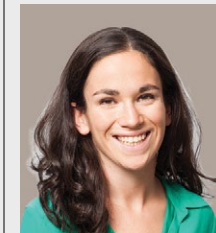
Patricia Laya, the Venezuela bureau chief for Bloomberg News, is studying Venezuela’s economic, sociopolitical, and health crises as tools of social oppression, and how the country’s authoritarian government has benefitted from a population subdued by hunger, misery, and disease.

### Felice León (U.S.)



Felice León, a video producer and presenter at the news site The Root, is studying the manifestations of Black joy from the antebellum era to the present, and the ways that the media can document these stories through visual storytelling.

### Julia Lurie (U.S.)



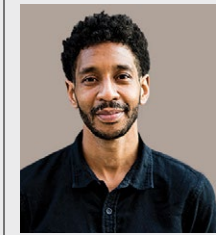
Julia Lurie, a senior reporter at Mother Jones, is studying the complex history of the U.S. child welfare system and examining the system’s racial and socioeconomic inequities, the impact of the movement for racial justice on reform efforts, and the effects of the overdose epidemic and the coronavirus pandemic on families in the system.

### Pacinte Mattar (Canada)



Pacinte Mattar, a journalist, writer, and producer based in Toronto, is studying how journalism can better foster, retain, and promote Black, Indigenous, and other racialized journalists. She is focusing on developing initiatives that lead to more representative newsrooms and coverage.

### Dave Mayers (U.S.)



Dave Mayers, a documentary producer and cinematographer at Vice News, is studying the barriers to entry for those wishing to diversify documentaries, and the best methods for overcoming those challenges domestically and internationally.

### Shereen Marisol Meraji (U.S.)



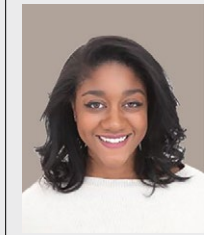
Shereen Marisol Meraji, most recently co-host and senior producer of NPR’s “Code Switch” podcast covering race and identity, is exploring ways for public media to attract and retain Latino audiences. After her fellowship, Meraji will join the Graduate School of Journalism at the University of California, Berkeley, as an assistant professor of race in journalism.

### Jakob Moll (Denmark)



Jakob Moll, co-founder and former CEO of Zetland, a membership-based digital newspaper in Denmark, is studying how trust evolves on the preferred digital platforms of the younger generations and how those dynamics can help support the membership business model for news organizations.

### Marisa Palmer (U.S.)



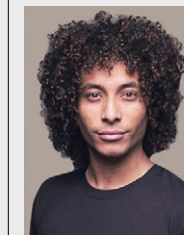
Marisa Palmer, a senior video producer for Business Insider’s news and documentary team, is studying the effects of police training programs in the U.S. and will develop a database for journalists, communities, and police departments that ranks the programs by quality, efficacy, and accessibility.

### Deb Pastner (U.S.)



Deb Pastner, director of photo and multimedia at the Star Tribune in Minneapolis, is examining how the racial reckoning in the wake of George Floyd’s death has altered the relationship between photojournalists and their subjects. She will explore ways to reframe and renew that association.

### Jonathan Rabb (U.S.)



Jonathan Rabb, founder of Watch The Yard, a digital platform for Black college students and alumni, is examining the use of virtual reality in journalism, with a focus on creating ethical and inclusive practices when using 360-degree video technologies to cover marginalized groups.

### Gabrielle Schonder (U.S.)



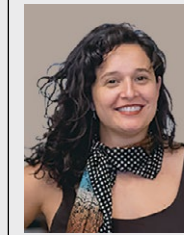
Gabrielle Schonder, a producer and reporter for “Frontline” and the Kirk Documentary Group, is studying innovations in reporting methods for documentary filmmakers and examining the intersection of media, technology, and policy to find ways to combat distrust and misinformation.

### Jim Urquhart (U.S.)



Jim Urquhart, a Colorado-based photojournalist who reports from across the U.S. on extremism, hate groups, and anti-government militias, is studying the rapid rise of right-wing extremism, the history of far-right violence, and the writings and political and social concepts that inspire militants.

### Natalia Viana (Brazil)



Natalia Viana, the co-founder and executive director of Agência Pública, Brazil’s first nonprofit investigative journalism outlet, is studying the erosion of democracy in Brazil and Latin America and the rise of far-right movements, with a focus on media manipulation and disinformation campaigns. ■

## “Journalists Make Me Better”

When I think the work can't matter, they show me it does

BY JOHN ARCHIBALD

“Why do I do what I do?” they asked. So, I went to the source of all wisdom to contemplate my

place in the world: folk singer Todd Snider, the barefoot poet laureate of me.

A man once said that the pinnacle of success,

Is when you've finally lost interest, In money, compliments, and publicity.

A noble enough idea, I suppose,

How on earth he does this, heaven only knows.

I know I need a lot more of all three of those,

Before I ever have the nerve to turn up my nose

At any money, compliments, and publicity.

Which — alas — is not the right answer. Were I to bank on journalism for money, or compliments, or publicity, I'd still be broke as the Ten Commandments, as Todd puts it in the song. And neurotic, in the wrong business, careening down the path toward more harm than good.

For once, Todd Snider can't speak for me. So, who can?

I got my first real journalism job 35 years ago at The Birmingham News in Alabama, which has since merged with sister newspapers under the website AL.com.

As a great, and sadly late, Pulitzer winner named Ron Casey put it, “If you want fine wine, go to France. If you want to write editorials, come to Alabama.”

So, I never left. I told myself it was possible to make a difference there, to tell stories and point out corruption and policies that kept the powerful in full power and the powerless with a lot less.

That is as good as money, more solid than compliments, and more fulfilling than publicity.



The more I contemplate this question — Why do I do what I do? — the more I trace the roots to the student newspaper at the University of Alabama, The Crimson White.

It was there, with an astonishing staff under the direction of editor Jan Crawford, that I learned to question, to hold authority to account, to speak up for those who had no platform, and, as editorial page editor, to say the things in print I'd never found the words to say with my mouth.

It also made me pay attention to the people who were attracted to journalism: idealists who hid their own hope beneath a veil of feigned cynicism.

Journalism has changed a lot since then: Local news is under threat, business models are broken, stories that once splashed across communities now make but a ripple, Twitter is an occupational mental health hazard, and recent attacks

“Despite political attacks on the press, journalists are the best people I've known

on the press — and fact itself — drive good people out of the business, and readers away from it.

Like many journalists, I wallowed in those changes as they came. But the more I became surrounded by innovative, mostly young, people seeking to change the world, the more I was reminded of my college paper, and why I got into this work.

Those people — colleagues — changed me, saved me, opened my mind to new ways to deliver news: by column, or long form, or animated videos, by video columns, or podcasts, or cartoons, or whatever comes next. I love the written word, but the message is the message. Not the medium.

We tried to keep one foot in the journalistic past, holding on to values and ethics the business demands, and another in the possibilities. It was fun again.

The more I thought of that, the more it answered the question: Why do I do what I do?

For readers. For sustenance. For health insurance. But mostly I do it — always have, I realize now — because of the kind of people I get to work with.

Despite political attacks on the press, true journalists are the best people I've known. It's a broad statement, sure, but in my experience the jackasses are exceptions rather than rules.

They are the reason I do what I do.

Because journalists are my idols. They always have been. Like Woodward and Bernstein, and Barlett and Steele, like Ida B. Wells and Steve Lopez and Cynthia Tucker and Sally Jenkins. Like people you've never heard of. The people who really care about this business are the most conscientious and devoted people I know.

They stand for truth, integrity, and for those who can't stand for themselves. They stand against tyranny, Twitter trolls, and weaponized, politically funded critics. Some of them face the threat of jail or death.

The real ones question themselves as much as others, examine their mistakes, and try to correct them. The others, well, they're not journalists at all.

When I focus on a world too small, journalists show me it is bigger. When I think the work can't matter, they show me it does. When I get lost from looking inward, they show me the value of looking out.

Journalists make me better. Not just as a writer, or a commentator, but as a human. Which is why I do what I do. ■



### AFTERIMAGE

“This assignment took me to a very silent place — a hospital in Western Poland with hastily erected Covid wards. ... Outside of those walls, the ‘anonymity’ coming with face masks resulted in the cooling of any casual contacts. Seeing the two young paramedics taking care of that patient ... was one of the most moving moments I have witnessed since the beginning of the pandemic.”

Maciek Nabrdalik, photojournalist and 2017 Nieman Fellow, on photographing the coronavirus pandemic in Poland

### NIEMAN ONLINE

#### NiemanReports

**Journalism in Myanmar: “An Apocalypse for the Media”**  
Myanmar's former ‘outlaw’ journalists lead the battle for a free press

#### NiemanLab

**What newsrooms still don't understand about the internet**  
You can't report on a culture war and also be an invisible bystander

#### NiemanStoryboard

**Empathy as the prime directive in writing about displaced people**  
Award-winning author Jessica Goudeau says journalists must expand their toolbox to write about the growing issues of displacement

**“WE LIVE AND  
WE LEARN  
OR WE DON’T  
LIVE AT ALL.”**

**—JOHN ARCHIBALD, PAGE 34**