

NIEMAN REPORTS

# Nieman

## Storytelling and Social Media



**HANNA,**  
*one of the subjects in  
"Maidan: Portraits  
from the Black Square,"  
Kiev, February 2014*



*“Made in Boston: Stories of Invention and Innovation” brought together, from left, author Ben Mezrich, Boston Globe reporter Hiawatha Bray, author Steve Almond, WGBH’s “Innovation Hub” host Kara Miller, NPR’s “On Point” host Tom Ashbrook, “Our Bodies, Ourselves” co-founder Judy Norsigian, journalist Laurie Penny, and MIT Media Lab director Joi Ito*

[+ NIEMAN.HARVARD.EDU](https://nieman.harvard.edu), EVENTS

## Innovators “always said no when other people said yes and they always said yes when other people said no. They saw industries that didn’t exist and knew that they could exist.”

—KARA MILLER  
HOST OF “INNOVATION HUB” ON WGBH RADIO

## NiemanReports

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### From the Archives

For some photojournalists, it’s the shots they didn’t take they remember best. In the Summer 1998 issue of Nieman Reports, Nieman Fellows Stan Grossfeld, David Turnley, Steve Northup, Stanley Forman, and Frank Van Riper reflect on the shots they missed, whether by mistake or by choice, in “The Best Picture I Never Took” series.

## NiemanLab

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### Digital Strategy at The New York Times

In a lengthy memo, The New York Times revealed that it hopes to double its digital revenue to \$800 million by 2020. The paper plans to simplify subscriptions, improve advertising and sponsorships, optimize for different mediums, and extend its international reach.

### No Comments

An in-depth look at why seven major news organizations—Reuters, Mic, The Week, Popular Science, Recode, The Verge, and USA Today’s FTW—suspended user comments, the results of that decision, and how these media outlets are using social media to encourage reader engagement.

## NiemanStoryboard

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### 5 Questions: Geraldine Brooks

Former Wall Street Journal foreign correspondent and Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Geraldine Brooks talks with her old Columbia Journalism School classmate Ricki Morell about her research and editing process and how journalism informs her fiction.

### Annotation Tuesday

“The Things That Carried Him” by Chris Jones won a National Magazine Award in 2009. Jones details the reporting and writing of the 17,000-word article he did for Esquire about Sergeant Joe Montgomery, who died in Iraq.



In an effort to communicate the toll of war, Anastasia Taylor-Lind mailed 921 postcards, each bearing the name of one war victim in Ukraine

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*By Anastasia Taylor-Lind*

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## PUBLISHER

Ann Marie Lipinski

## EDITOR

James Geary

## SENIOR EDITOR

Jan Gardner

## RESEARCHER/REPORTER

Jonathan Seitz

## EDITORIAL ASSISTANTS

Eryn M. Carlson

Tara W. Merrigan

## DESIGN

Pentagram

---

## EDITORIAL OFFICES

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

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## Contributors



**Anastasia Taylor-Lind** (page 16), a 2016 Nieman Fellow, is an English-Swedish photographer who often depicts women amidst conflict and war. A contributor to *National Geographic*, she is author of “Maidan: Portraits from the Black Square.”



**Neil Shea** (page 8) is a contributing editor at *The American Scholar* and the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, and his work regularly appears in *National Geographic*. He teaches at Boston University and publishes picture stories on Instagram as [@neilshea13](https://www.instagram.com/neilshea13).



**Celeste LeCompte** (page 24), a 2015 Nieman Fellow, is director of business development at ProPublica. She is the former managing editor for Gigaom Research, one of the first subscription products offered by a major blog network.



**Olivia Koski** (page 30) is a multimedia journalist and director of the science public engagement organization *Guerilla Science*. Her writing has appeared in *Popular Mechanics*, *Wired*, and *Scientific American*.



**Monica Campbell** (page 36), a 2010 Nieman Fellow, is an editor and reporter at PRI’s “The World,” where she focuses on immigration coverage in the U.S. Prior to joining PRI, Campbell reported from Latin America and Afghanistan.



**Elisabeth Witchel** (page 42) launched the Committee to Protect Journalists’ Global Campaign Against Impunity in 2007 and has written four editions of its annual “Getting Away with Murder: Global Impunity Index” report.

“MAINTAINING YOUR INDEPENDENCE, WHATEVER THE PRESSURES”

*INVESTIGATIVE REPORTER Robert Parry, founder and editor of Consortiumnews.com, may be best known for his breaking news reporting during the Iran-contra affair in the 1980s. He received the 2015 I.F. Stone Medal for Journalistic Independence. Following is an edited excerpt of remarks he prepared for the award ceremony in October:*

I ADMIRE I.F. STONE’S independent journalism way back in college. I even lobbied the school library to subscribe to his newsletter. Reading it weekly shaped how I came to view journalism—as a profession that required endless skepticism.

I had the privilege of meeting him in the early 1980s when I was an investigative reporter for the Associated Press (AP) in Washington. I had gotten hold of some classified records about financial misconduct in El Salvador. He called and asked if he could read the documents. I said sure, and he showed up at the AP office on K Street. Through his thick glasses, he spent a couple hours poring through the papers.



**A Sandinista soldier looks for U.S.-backed contra rebels in Nicaragua**

Though I shared Stone’s view that journalists should be the consummate outsiders, I came to the profession through a different route. I spent the first part of my career as a mainstream journalist. But I never forgot his insistence on maintaining your independence, whatever the pressures. To me, the core responsibility of a journalist is to have an open mind toward information, to have no agenda, to have no preferred outcome. That’s the deal you make with your readers, to follow the facts wherever they lead.

I consider this award a recognition of what we’ve accomplished at Consortiumnews.com over the past two decades. This honor goes to the many talented reporters and analysts who have written for us. They have made Consortiumnews.com a place where you can find thoughtful, well-researched, well-reported stories well worth reading nearly every day of the year.

For those of you who don’t know much about Consortiumnews.com, here’s a brief history. The project began

out of my frustration with the mainstream news media. At AP, where I worked from 1974 to 1987, I was perhaps best known for breaking many of the stories that we now know as the Iran-contra scandal. These included the first article about a little known Marine officer named Oliver North and—with my AP colleague Brian Barger—the first story about how some of the Nicaraguan contras got themselves mixed up in the drug trade.

To say that these stories weren’t always popular would be an understatement. But they were well-reported and borne out when the Iran-contra scandal exploded in late 1986. Sadly, I had burned many bridges at AP in the fights to push our stories to the wire.

I went on to work at Newsweek and then I worked on some documentaries for PBS Frontline. But it was becoming increasingly clear to me that the space for serious investigative journalism was closing down. With the arrival of Bill Clinton, there was a market for silly, tawdry scandals. There was even less interest in the unsolved mysteries of the 1980s—old, complicated stuff without much sex.

A key moment occurred in late 1994 when I got access to the files of a congressional inquiry into an Iran-contra spinoff scandal. So I made copies and snuck them out of the Capitol. Next, I prepared a summary that I felt would change the history of the 1980s. But I couldn’t find anyone interested in publishing it.

One day in 1995 when I was grousing about this state of affairs, my oldest son Sam, who had just finished college, said that instead of complaining, why didn’t I publish my information on the Internet.



**Robert Parry**

He said there were things called websites. I really knew next to nothing about these matters, but I listened. Sam—though not a techie—figured out how to build a website. We launched our no-frills website in November 1995 as the first investigative magazine based on the Internet.

The original idea was to provide a home for neglected investigative journalists and their work. I thought I could raise significant amounts of money from a variety of sources, hence the clunky name Consortiumnews. But I soon learned that “independent journalism”—while popular in the abstract—is not something people really want to invest much in. They’d prefer to know how the stories are likely to come out. So we always struggled with money, but we did build a loyal readership that kept us going with small donations.

To my pleasant surprise, I discovered that a number of ex-CIA analysts were also looking for a place to publish their work. They shared our concern that the United States was veering away from fact-based policies. They felt that this decoupling from reality was careening the country toward international catastrophes. And they were right. ■

## “What is it like to be there?” Alex Miller, Vice Media’s global head of content, on the firm’s in-your-face reporting, its appeal to millennials, and what legacy outlets like The New York Times and BBC do well

**A**LEX MILLER IS GLOBAL HEAD of content at Vice Media, overseeing the media company’s 10 digital channels, in addition to the monthly print magazine’s website *Vice.com*. Miller, who began his career at the British magazine *New Musical Express* (NME), has been with *Vice* since 2008, first as an online editor and later as editor in chief of the company’s U.K. content before transitioning to his new role earlier this year.

Founded as a Canadian punk music magazine in 1994, *Vice* has since relocated to Brooklyn and burgeoned into an international multimedia empire with bureaus in more than 30 countries. Along with digital channels centered on everything from food (*Munchies*) to electronic music (*Thump*) to mixed martial arts (*Fightland*), the company’s properties include a record label, a book publishing division, and a film and TV production studio, along with an HBO documentary series produced by Bill Maher. *Vice*’s news division has an often provocative approach to reporting and storytelling that some criticize as too reporter-focused, rather than news-focused.

Miller became familiar with *Vice* around the time he was in college, watching its 2007 documentary “Heavy Metal in Baghdad,” which tracks an Iraqi band during the end of Saddam’s reign. Miller lauded its immersive approach geared toward young audiences as an “incredibly cool way” to look at news and culture. “I saw it and I was like, ‘That’s it. That’s the future. Everybody else has to pack up and

go home, because quite clearly there’s something important happening here.”

Miller spoke at the Nieman Foundation in October. Edited excerpts:

### On *Vice*’s style

For our video dispatches, you’ve got to remember the medium that they’re being watched on. This is being put out through YouTube, so you’re surrounded by links going back to previous articles written about a subject, and films that may explain the situation more in-depth. But one of the things we are conscious about is this idea of, What is it like to be there? How do you relate to the people? Our conversational tone, the way that we report on stories, is a lot like we’re telling our friends about it. I think that is the key to our success, and I think that is also how we manage to stand out.

I don’t think it’d be breaking news to tell anyone that, for a long time, it felt like news was the preserve of a certain type of person. There was a certain type of person, who looked a certain type of way, who spoke in a tone of voice that exists nowhere beyond the news realm. Guess what? That was exhausted a long time ago. We started to approach it in a new way, with a new tone of voice. That doesn’t necessarily mean swearing. That just means being normal, not acting like a drone.



Alex Miller

### On revenue streams

I think that one of the great benefits for us has been that—because we were originally a free magazine—when the Internet started demanding everything for free, it didn’t shock us in quite the same way that it shocked some other organizations. Frankly, we’re a brand for millennials, and a lot of millennials don’t anticipate having to pay for their content.

Now, look at our deal with HBO, look at our deal with Rogers in Canada, our deal with Antenna across a lot of southern Europe. We’re in Greece, Serbia, Germany, Italy, France. We’ve got things coming in the U.K., and obviously the U.S. The bulk of our business model is about making and selling our content.

### On lessons for mainstream media

I wouldn’t tell any organization how to run their business. I think it’s very easy to be very critical of grand old news organizations when actually they do fantastic work. Who’s going to sit here and say the BBC or The New York Times are bad at what they do? They’re not. They’re fantastic at what they do. The point is that we now live in a digital era, and it is limitless in space. What we’re able to do is come over and offer a different voice.

You probably read, if you’re interested, 20 or 30 different news sources in a day. We just want to be one of them, with a different perspective. When I worked in the U.K., people from the BBC would come in and they’d say, “How can the BBC be more like *Vice*?” I’d say, “No! The BBC is awesome for you, for me, for the British public.” Know what you are, and stick with it. Just look at The New Yorker. It hasn’t changed much, and it’s great.

At the same time, there are lessons to be learned. I often think that there’s been a real benefit for us being the outsider. In 2011, there were horrible riots in London. I was there with a *Vice* crew, and loads of other cameramen were finding



*Alex Miller reported in Caracas, Venezuela during anti-government protests in 2014*

it completely impossible to film out there. If you were BBC, ITV, or Channel 4 News, the kids were coming and attacking the cameras. But we just fit in, not because we're clever but because it was a strange benefit of being from the outside. For years, we wouldn't necessarily be getting interviews with the absolute top, with political behemoths. As such, we learned to talk to people to find out what's going on in the streets.

### **On the multiplatform approach**

In September, we aired "Fixing the System," a documentary on HBO with President Obama visiting a prison. We thought, over the week leading up to it and the three weeks after it, let's make sure that people know that this isn't us coming and going, "Wham, bam. Look, here we are." This is something we care about and something that we believe people should be focusing on, digging into, and paying attention to until things actually change. As such, we got our 10 digital channels to all write about prisons in America from different angles in the subjects that they are relevant to. Munchies, our food channel, wrote about the state of prison food. Motherboard, our tech channel, wrote about the insanely expensive rate of whatever the prison version of Skype is. Broadly, our women's channel, wrote a lot about women's issues in jail. Even Thump, our electronic dance music channel, managed to find angles to write about it. Then the documentary aired on TV, and we continued the series. A special edition of the magazine launched, which was

about prisoners, as well, and all this time we were doing stuff on Snapchat Discover, too.

It does make me very excited because that's TV, mobile, online, print, all focused on one idea. As we come to terms with the fact that we're one of the few organizations able to actually do that, your mind starts to boggle.

### **On criticism of millennials**

Millennials voted Obama into office. They fueled the Arab Spring with social media. They pushed for gay rights. They encouraged new waves of feminism on campus. They put "Black Lives Matter" on the front pages of newspapers. Edward Snowden is a millennial. Kendrick Lamar is a millennial. They are a passionate, engaged group of people. In 2020, one in three adults is going to be a millennial. That's why we want to reach for them. That's why we want to talk to them, because they're more connected than any generation before. When they're so clearly unafraid of change, it's important that somebody's reaching out to them because, right now, I think the only people who are doing a good job of that are bloody ISIS.

**It's a myth that millennials have a short attention span. If they find rubbish, they'll quickly click off. People watch our videos for an average of 18 minutes**

I can't get my head around the people who talk about millennials being disengaged. I've never come across a more engaged generation. People have this myth that millennials have a short attention span. That's nonsense. They have a great bullshit detector. If they think that something's rubbish in the first 30 seconds, they'll click off it. People stay and watch our videos for an average of 18 minutes.

### **On reporter safety**

There is absolutely nobody sent anywhere by Vice who doesn't have the training, who doesn't have the support that they need. We have rigorous practices. I know this because I helped to put them together. We do hostile environment training. Everything you would expect from every standard news organization is covered. If you think our correspondents are inexperienced—they may be young, but they're not inexperienced, and they're not untrained. We take this incredibly seriously. We're not morons, sending children into danger. This is real, important work.

Frankly, the situation in Turkey [where a Vice journalist has been imprisoned] says a lot more about the Turkish regime than it does about our journalists who are still there. If anybody wants to write about Mohammed Rasool, our fixer who's still in a prison in Turkey, please do. Please write about it, please tweet about it, because we've got to keep the pressure on these people who imprisoned an innocent man under outrageous and false allegations.

### **On the next five years**

Obviously there will be technological innovations that are going to shape it. Who knows? I guess whether it's Facebook posting native articles or things like Apple News becoming the new front page of the Internet, those will be important innovations. I still think it should be about the people who are putting together the best stories. It doesn't matter what platform it is. It doesn't matter if you're reading a magazine or watching a documentary. Ultimately, the only thing that matters is a good story. Ultimately, it has to be a good story, well told. ■

## Just the Facts Damakant Jayshi, NF '07, brings political and media factchecking to Nepal

I HAVE BEEN FASCINATED WITH FACT-checking ever since I first read about it during the 2004 U.S. presidential election. Now I'm proud to have brought this tradi-

tion to Nepal and the surrounding region as founder of South Asia Check, a website officially launched in September that focuses on political and media news. It is one of the first such sites in South Asia.

The fact-checking website is a project of Panos South Asia, the non-governmental media development organization for which I am executive director. Given the media landscape in most South Asian countries, where there's too much reliance on anonymous sources and the prejudices of reporters too often show up in stories, fact-checking should have started here a long time ago. If the media's credibility is questioned, its role as a watchdog suffers. Moreover, politicians in the region, like elsewhere, lie and make unfounded claims.

There have been plenty of stories for South Asia Check to take on. When there was confusion, even among lawmakers, about voting rules during the debate over a new constitution for Nepal, South Asia Check researched the questions and clarified the matter. The new constitution was approved in September, nine years after a Maoist insurgency ended.

## If the media's credibility is questioned, its role as a watchdog suffers

I'm buoyed by the fact that readers have jumped in, asking us to fact-check claims and verify the authenticity of photographs. In response to one recent request concerning a sensitive subject, we examined how well indigenous groups living on the plains bordering India are represented in the legislature. On South Asia Check, we also track the use of anonymous sources on the front pages of some major daily newspapers in the region.

Here's what has made us immensely proud of our work: Now readers themselves do fact-checking and draw our attention to it. We hope the spirit continues and more media outlets follow suit.

The website is still a work-in-progress, but signs are promising. I believe South Asia Check is strengthening transparency and accountability in politics, business, and media. ■



*In September, protesters in Kathmandu objected to Nepal's new constitution. Factchecking by South Asia Check clarified the voting rules*



## Parkinson's Is My Beat

Jon Palfreman, NF '06, investigates Parkinson's disease as both an author and a sufferer

MY LIFE CHANGED ON A COLD, DARK, rainy January morning in 2011. Worried about a modest tremor in my left hand, my doctor had referred me to a neurologist. At the appointment, I was asked to perform various motor tasks, such as rotating my hands back and forth. After 20 minutes of tests, the neurologist told me I had Parkinson's disease. My symptoms were mild and confined to the left side of my body, but the malady would inevitably progress, and, in time, I would need treatment with drugs.

The irony was that this wasn't my first brush with Parkinson's. Decades before, I had reported on the condition, generating

two "Nova" documentaries and a book on the subject. But to be frank, my journalistic familiarity with Parkinson's disease did not initially help me to cope with my diagnosis. I left the hospital in a state of shock.

It took me over a year to come to terms with it. The only person I told during the first three months after my diagnosis was my wife. I consulted other neurologists who confirmed I had Parkinson's disease. I didn't reach out to other Parkinson's sufferers. The fragile, bent, trembling figures I observed in neurologists' waiting rooms saddened and angered me. Was this really who I would become?

Gradually, I began to think more clearly. I read everything I could about Parkinson's disease and spoke to neuroscientists, clinicians, and fellow patients. After all, as a longtime science journalist, I was better placed than most to figure out the state of Parkinson's research and ascertain what kind of future I faced. In a profound sense, understanding Parkinson's disease and finding a cure are now my beat.

Can Parkinson's be slowed, stopped, or even reversed? Can the disease be prevented before it starts, like polio and smallpox? Perhaps. As I write in my new book "Brain Storms: The Race to Unlock the Mysteries of Parkinson's Disease," published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux in September, this age of



In Parkinson's, a protein kills neurons

neuroscience offers hope for developing new treatments. Many scientists studying the human brain view Parkinson's as a pathfinder disease, one that may be key to understanding the organ's complexity.

The bad actor causing Parkinson's, many researchers argue, is a common protein called alpha-synuclein, which goes rogue, forming sticky toxic aggregates that jump from cell to cell inside the brain, killing neurons as they go. New anti-Parkinson's therapies targeting alpha-synuclein are about to enter clinical trials and I will be volunteering to participate in these crucial evaluations.

My diagnosis has forced me to explore the tension between my professional and personal lives. Journalists seek truths about the current state of science. But patients thrive on hope about advances on the horizon. So, whether or not this current round of trials turns out to benefit me, I remain convinced that this disease will be vanquished one day. ■

**HOW WE THINK**  
IN HIS NEW "HIDDEN BRAIN" PODCAST, NPR SCIENCE CORRESPONDENT SHANKAR VEDANTAM, NF '10, EXPLORES THE FRONTIERS OF PSYCHOLOGY

MY NPR PODCAST "HIDDEN Brain" launched this fall, but it's been more than a decade in the making, one that started mere blocks from Lippmann House.

While reporting for The Washington Post in 2004, I interviewed Harvard psychologist Mahzarin R. Banaji about work she had done to uncover people's unconscious prejudices.

I was so inspired by her research and so shaken by the findings that I changed the trajectory of my career.

For the last several years, first at the Post and now as an NPR science correspondent, I've been writing about the ways hidden factors shape our perceptions and behavior. My goal is to connect the rigor and insights of academia to the public's concerns and interests. Audiences have gravitated to my stories, telling me how meaningful they are to them. People have told me they'd like something more in-depth than my four-minute radio stories, and that's where the idea for the podcast came from.

Much like many of my print and radio stories, along with my 2010 book

"The Hidden Brain," the podcast seeks to link psychology and sociology research with people's everyday lives. In the first episode, I explored "switchtracking" with author Sheila Heen. Switchtracking happens when two people are having parallel conversations with one another. The thing that's great about switchtracking as a subject is that, the moment people hear about it, they'll remember conversations over the last week in which it happened. And a discussion about switchtracking does what social science does best: it reveals us to ourselves. Once we slow down and observe what's happening around us, we can see the factors shaping our

perceptions and behaviors, and that gives us some control over them.

Podcasts lend themselves to iteration and to learning. We have the opportunity to experiment with ways to make science fun and engaging. We're integrating games, along with storytelling and conversations, into each episode. In a segment called "Mad Scientist," I describe a social science experiment to my guests and ask them to figure out what the experiment found. There's entertainment value in that, and it allows listeners to play along.

With "Hidden Brain," we want to entertain, but we also want to provide insights for people to apply at work, at home, and throughout their lives. ■

*Setiel lived near Lake Turkana in Kenya when she became severely ill. Before her death, she sought help from a spiritual healer*

# Gathering The Shards

**Instagram as a storytelling tool for long-form writers who want to go short**

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY NEIL SHEA

IN LATE JUNE, I WAS TRAVELING WITH photographer Lynsey Addario through Sicily, working on a story about migrants arriving in Europe from Africa. During a car trip across the island, we started talking about writing—specifically, how I was going to approach the long feature we had joined up to do. Lynsey, already an award-winning shooter, had just published an intimate memoir and knew well the joys and difficulties of hauling ideas and images into words. I joked that I'd really rather not write long at all. Then I told her how the most fun and satisfying nonfiction I'd written lately was radically short, and published on Instagram.

Lynsey was stunned. "You can write on Instagram?"

She laughed, picked up one of her phones. Swiped toward the retro-camera icon.

"I thought that was for, like, food and cats."

It's true that Instagram doesn't seem like an obvious destination for writers. It moves

fast. There are a lot of cats. And selfies and shoes and lattes. The space given over to words is fairly small, too—especially for those of us who've spent years in this business fighting for the right to commit long-form. But soon after I began experimenting within the app's creative constraints, something strange happened—I found I loved writing short.

I came to understand that the Instagram experience, with its constant flow of images and text boxes, presented an alternative story geometry that demanded from me new things. Shorter stories, sure, but also a deeper consideration of photographs and the rich, nuanced ways that words and pictures work together. Over time I realized that beneath the selfie surface, Instagram provided a powerful, unexpected, and mostly underutilized storytelling tool.

Consider it this way: Instagram has essentially become one of the world's most





successful general interest magazines. More than 300 million people use it each month. An average of 70 million images are uploaded to it daily. And each one represents a page, a story, a sliver of light or perception bouncing in from somewhere around the world. You've seen Instagram's users: often young, highly engaged, head-down on subways, buses, and sidewalks, thumbing through streams of images that pour into their phones. That absorption is not for nothing, and that global audience is built around a simple premise: that every post contains a story.

So far, this territory has been left to photographers. Since the app's release in 2010, photojournalists have been using it to great effect, showcasing unpublished images, digging into their archives, sharing ongoing creative projects. Writers, though, have largely stayed away from Instagram as a storytelling platform. There are plenty of reasons for this—it's not easy, after all, to write short.

But those who waded in will find that storytelling on Instagram is an awesome hack: a purpose for which the thing wasn't intended, but at which it excels. The app is vibrant, flexible, and unusually transcendent. In mobile terms, it's immediately more democratic than filter-heavy Facebook, less terse than Twitter, less ephemeral than Snapchat. And, most important to me, is the platform's reach: Instagram provides a creative space where voices and views that might otherwise be ignored, lost, or mangled during their brush with journalism can be shared, beautifully, with almost anyone.

**I** CONVERTED TO INSTAGRAM IN April 2014, when I traveled to Kenya's Lake Turkana for a National Geographic story. My editor, Peter Gwin, had urged me to start using the app to post dispatches from my fieldwork and, at first, I was wary. I'm not a photographer. At the time I didn't have an Instagram account. And what I saw there, on the phones of friends, seemed like Facebook-lite. I knew Instagram allowed only about 2,200 characters (roughly 360 words, in my experience) with each caption, and I doubted much meaning could be crammed into such a small place.

But Peter kept after me, and he shared a few pieces that he had posted to Instagram from reporting trips to Rwanda and the Central African Republic. I was impressed. These were not selfies, or even self-referen-

## Instagram has become a successful general interest magazine

tial. They were small moments, rich in detail, and easy to read. They hinted at what might be possible. Around the same time, I had folded iPhone photography into my basic reporting process: I made portraits of everyone I spoke to, just as I would record their phone numbers and the correct spellings of their names. That coincidence—Pete's work, my new photography—convinced me I could at least try making short profile packages. I decided to treat it like an experiment. I thought it wouldn't last.

My earliest Instagram writing from Lake Turkana was hardly a story at all. For the most part, I posted pretty pictures, wrote flat little captions. Not long into my fieldwork, though, in a remote village hundreds of kilometers from the nearest paved road, I met a fisherman who'd survived a crocodile attack, and his story shook me. He'd been ambushed while checking his nets, waist-deep in the dark brown water. As the beast carried him away, his mind went blank. Then white. He found himself drifting into another world, possibly into death. He could feel teeth in his flesh, but in his ears he heard beautiful sounds. Somehow, before the croc took him under, he snapped back to his senses and remembered a piece of folk wisdom. With two fingers he stabbed at the croc's eyes. Stunned, it released him, and he fumbled bleeding back to shore.

Later, at the local clinic, he endured awful nightmares, reptile-induced PTSD.

"I have seen it in my dreams," he said. "Coming up the hallway to get me."

He told me he had not yet returned to the water.

I spent a couple of hours interviewing him, drawing pictures of where the croc had set its jaws across his thighs. From a storyteller's perspective, it was amazing, the kind of experience you want to share. But I knew it was unlikely to make it into my final magazine piece. It was almost too narrow, and would probably be lost in the larger, more formal piece I'd have to file describing en-

vironmental issues, conflict, and cultural change. A year earlier his story would've settled into my notebook like sediment. But I wanted to tell it, and with Instagram, I suddenly had a way.

At the end of our interview I asked him to sit for an iPhone portrait outside the mud hut where we'd been drinking hot Coke. I took a few shots in harsh afternoon light, decided black and white would work best, given the bad contrast. That evening, I wrote up the story, staying close to his personal narrative. I didn't try to explain why I was telling it or veer off into statistics about croc attacks in East Africa. I had already established, in earlier posts, that I was in Kenya working for National Geographic. Anyone who cared to could scroll back and find that nod to the tired old nut graf.

I didn't want to choke his story with facts. So I wrote for mood and tone, distilling the transformative event of the man's life into 268 words. I used simple techniques of lede and arc and kicker that I'd learned a long time ago, in the newsroom. I examined each word to see if it deserved a place. Mostly I kept hitting delete.

To date, about 500 people have liked the small story package I posted to Instagram (and more than 1,300 liked a later rewrite). More than 70 people have commented on these pieces. Likes and comments are the going measure of success on the app, at once addictive and opaque, and the count is comparatively small. It also doesn't mean all those people read the pieces, though I'll bet most did. In the end the important thing, what I'd been trained for years to do, was to share that man's story. After I posted it, as the comments began to plink in, like pennies, from people I'd never met, I saw that in a small way I'd accomplished one of the things I came into journalism for—to give voice to the voiceless. It made me hungry for more.

Over the course of my fieldwork and in the few weeks following, I tried different story structures and voices and designs. I began seeing the Instagram series as unique from—but complementary to—the documentary work I was doing for the big magazine. To use a phrase of the moment, it was "slow journalism," or, the product of a lot of sitting around, listening, and taking notes.

In one pair of stories, I wrote about the quiet tension within the Daasanach tribe that was gathering around the practice of female circumcision. I contrasted the sto-



#### **In Their Own Words: The Refugee's Maid**

One morning you are wandering through the [Kakuma] refugee camp [in Kenya] when a stranger calls from a doorway, saying, "Woman, do you want work?" It's what you've been desperate for, though briefly you resist, fist on hip in the dusty street. He can see you aren't a refugee. The beads make it obvious—the heavy plastic hive wound round your neck and the straight spine that helps you carry it. That's why he asks. You're small but appear strong, and why else would a Turkana woman wander here? There is no interview, no negotiation (With what, Catherine Lometo, could you negotiate?) And so you become a housemaid for a refugee who even in his stateless poverty is a degree or two less poor than you. It's one of the little riddles of this place, that the tribe to whom God gave the land should become servants of those who by great misfortune landed here. There are hundreds like you. Your employer is a Muslim exiled from Ethiopia. He has a wife, children, a touch of pious arrogance. When you arrive in the mornings to wash and sweep, the children without greeting withdraw like mist into other rooms. You don't even know their names. Details less relevant than money. But your employer is not a bad man, and when his monthly ration comes he shares with you some food, which feeds your brothers and sisters. So forgive him, the refugee, and return in the red evening to your village. There, younger sisters wait and beg like fledglings. It's only beads they want, to coil blues and yellows around their slender necks, to become beautiful, too, strand by strand, and keep a secret for themselves. — See the series: [#kakumaseries2014](#)

ries of three women who performed the cutting, one old, and two very young. The old woman explained graphically what she cut and why. To her, the practice was a matter of her tribe's survival. The younger women told me how they were subtly trying to transform the practice, make it safer, maybe even work toward its end.

"The old ways are sometimes good," one of them, named Kalle, told me. "And sometimes they're not. I saw what was being done to women and I decided I could do better myself."

I'd never intended to write about the subject, had never thought women would speak to me so openly about it. But they did,

## **On Instagram, I write for mood and tone, not for facts**

and here were more voices worth sharing. I took a straightforward writing approach, trying to preserve the tone of the debate as I had observed it—no screaming match, no finger-waving or moralizing. Rather, a parallel discourse that would be settled, like many other controversies along the lakeshore, by the gradual death of elders and the collapse of their spiritual world. Did it explain everything? Does any story ever do that? What these pieces accomplished, quietly and perfectly, was all I expected of them—to shine a little light. Enough people read them to make it feel like I wasn't talking to myself.

In subsequent pieces I wrote in second person, or third. Once I posted a photograph of a spitting cobra, addressed the story as a letter to the snake, and used it to describe a common moment in the lives of the shepherd boys with whom I'd been traveling—wherein they had fled screaming from the snake and then turned and run back after it, attacking like the knights in "Monty Python and the Holy Grail." In another piece, I chose paraphrased first-person narration, and wrote in the voice of an old man who remembered the rhythms of a hippo hunt from an era long gone. Following that story, I posted one that revealed my reporting method in that moment—which was to hand over my notebook and pen and let the old hunters, the last of their kind, draw their own memories.

Two of the most successful word-picture stories of the series included a severely ill woman, named Setiel, who permitted us to observe the intimate spiritual treatments she received from a traditional healer. Several times Randy Olson, a National Geographic photographer, and I traveled with her to the lake's edge and watched as she and the healer, Galte, waded into the shallows and scooped handfuls of mud onto Setiel's thin frame. Applied and rinsed away, the rich, dark sediment was believed to remove illness and restore the patient's health.

When Setiel died a few weeks later, I was deeply upset. We had tried to help her, with food and medicine, and we had searched for help from the local clinic and with a local missionary. It was all too late for Setiel. We hadn't known her well, but in that time and place it didn't matter. I wanted to write about her again, and by then, about four weeks into the Instagram experiment, I had a growing group of followers who had read the story of her treatment and who, I thought, might want to hear of her death. I wrote a small

obituary for Setiel and posted with it one of the last photos I'd taken of her.

"When there seemed no hope left she turned homeward," I wrote, in part, "searching for healing in old rites and prayers, in balms of the dark, rich mud that her people believe can swallow sickness away. She defied the evil spirits she thought were haunting her. She said she wasn't afraid."

At least 700 people saw it. Not many. Probably more, though, than would oth-

erwise have known she existed. Probably more than read the obituary of my grandfather, who died just before I'd gone to Kenya. When I made that connection, I realized the numbers didn't matter so much anymore.

Slowly I came to enjoy the creative constraint of Instagram, how it asked me to strip things down, pay attention to basics. I began using hashtags to convey some static factual context—the name of a village, say, or a tribe's name, an issue—stuff that's of-

ten handled in datelines or headlines. I also began using unique hashtags to organize pieces, both within the enormous galaxy of Instagram, and at a smaller level, where readers could find custom features made from collections of related posts. At the bottom of each post about Lake Turkana, for example, a reader will find the tag #jadeseaseries2014—a reference to the lake's nickname, the Jade Sea. Instagram automatically archives images by their post date, and clicking on that tag (I call them "series tags") delivers you to a feed, or a page, containing more than three dozen of my Turkana stories.

I wrote thousands of words from the lakeshore. To my surprise, my audience quickly grew. By the end of the experiment, I had accidentally created a record of our story-building process for National Geographic. More importantly, I recorded lives and struggles in a place few people have ever heard of, and fewer will ever visit. I have no scientific way to gauge the effect of the series, no metrics on audience penetration or age-set or income. At worst, hundreds of people I do not know and have never met routinely checked in to see the stories. At best, several thousand people did.

The long magazine feature I eventually wrote from this fieldwork appeared in the August 2015 issue of National Geographic, a magazine with millions of readers around the world. But I consider that initial Instagram series to be the better work in several ways.

The job of a nonfiction writer is to gather as many shards of "truth" as possible and assemble them into a story. On Instagram, each post is a shard, and I collected far more there than I could ever do in a magazine. Taken together, the magazine story and the Instagram work comprise a lot of documentary material. More than my employer would have known what to do with. It isn't perfectly organized, but it's been a valuable test of the platform. And it has again fulfilled that desire to see more voices and faces and stories raised into view.

SINCE THAT INITIAL EXPERIMENT, I've done many more, finding inspiration and literary precedent for short-form writing in fiction and nonfiction, poetry, and art. At times I've thought about Instagram through the lens of old Rick Bragg stories, slimming down toward emotional moments



**In Their Own Words: Hunting Hippos**

When we were young, the shore [of Lake Turkana in Kenya] was thick with grass and that is where we hunted hippos. There were so many then, grazing in the deep green grass. Sometimes 20 of us would go, each man carrying a harpoon. We would tie long ropes to the harpoon points and wrap the ropes around our waists, like belts. Then we would stalk them. Quietly. Softly. Hippos are clever, and very fierce. And the hair around their mouths! It can cut like a blade. The first man would creep forward and stab and sink the point home. Then he would unwrap the rope from his waist and start pulling. This is very important. If you were slow, if you didn't unwrap it fast enough, the hippo might drag you away when it tried to escape. That was the most dangerous part. Once the first man landed his harpoon, others would step up and stab the hippo. Then we all pulled our ropes and slowly reeled the animal in. Later, everyone got some of the meat but the glory always fell upon that first man. He returned home carrying the ears and tail, and women would sing their way down from the village to meet him. Back then our culture depended on hippos. It was like killing a lion, or an elephant. You were a hero. Yes, I miss it. I liked it so much. Now you can't even see hippos here. The last one I remember came in the 1990s, and someone shot it with an AK-47. But that's not how we did it. We two are among the last who remember hunting the old way. // #elmolo #laketurkana #hippo #hunting #natgeo #onassignment with @randyolson + @natgeo // See the series: #jadeseaseries2014

## Instagram writers find inspiration in haiku, song lyrics, and comic books

and powerful details. And I've been influenced by classical Japanese forms, including *haiga*, in which haiku verse, often describing mood and nature, is paired with simple ink illustrations. I know other Instagram writers who find inspiration in comic books, graphic novels, and song lyrics.

I've also been inspired by many photojournalists who've demonstrated that there's enormous opportunity to use Instagram to leverage good social documentary. A few include Matt Black, with his series on the "Geography of Poverty," posted to MSNBC's photography feed and his own account; Radcliffe Royce, who pairs images with very personal essays about identity; and David Guttenfelder, who created an Instagram account to share images from inside North Korea. Another of my favorites is a collaborative project affiliated with the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism called "Everyday Incarceration," which explores the lives of inmates, their families, and communities.

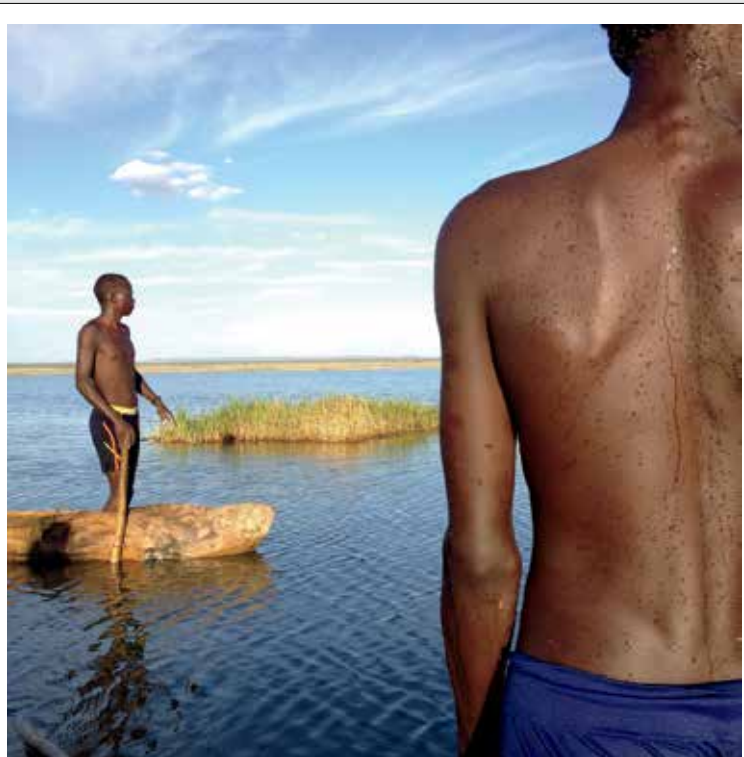
In most cases, I steer away from using journalistic conventions in my writing. I've mentioned the nut graf. Facts, too, by which I mean bits of cold data, or what a student of mine once called "fact spam." Attribution, experts, institutional voice—all of these I was happy to dump. Instagram is not a destination for news or heavy explanatory nonfiction. There are better places for that. I don't believe standard forms, developed for print and television, really fit onto Instagram.

Let me be clear, though: This opinion does not mean I jettisoned more than a decade of practice in the ethics of American-style journalism. Everything I do is based on reported fact and direct observation. Ditching old methods was remarkably freeing, but I do not feel it relieved me of journalistic responsibility. What I mean is that I choose to remove or ignore things that could slow a story down unnecessarily, or block it from entering the light stream.

Every writer, every editor or publication, must make their own choices about what rules will guide their use of Instagram. My advice is to let it run much looser, stylistically, than at first feels comfortable.

This has perhaps been easier for me to do because I'm a freelancer operating outside the umbrella of a larger publication, and I've been able to totally ignore or employ the news cycle. In September 2014, for example, I traveled to the United Nations' Kakuma

refugee camp, also in northern Kenya, and began writing an Instagram series about it not long after a massive flood inundated the camp and a burst of tribal violence sent many refugees fleeing from it. I resisted the temptation to write about the news or its aftermath because I knew Instagram audiences—mine, at least—were not using the app that way. But later, in December, when President Obama announced his plan to normalize relations with Cuba, the news



### The Magic of Fiery Nights

The wooden canoes always seemed to hobble through the water, half-sunk and fickle as a Sunday drunk. Barely more than flotsam. Once I asked who made them and the fishermen pointed north to Ethiopia, to a fading kingdom of trees. Many things came from there, looping down through the delta—guns, fish, fertilizer, rumors of death or rebellion. Rafts of thick grass came, too, and every few days a new flotilla drifted into [Lake Turkana in Kenya]. Most were green specks, but now and then a large one appeared, an islet rustling with birds and frogs and other creatures. Occasionally the local priest, a German, would swim out to meet them and haul aboard as though he were a giant shouldering into Lilliput. Imagine—this white guy rising from the opaque water, long-haired and pale as dawn. He rode the islets south for a time and did not worry about crocodiles. In the middle of our stay something strange occurred. For several nights the islets arrived on fire. One after another, glowing fierce as comets. Before I slept I would scan the darkness and note their positions in the void beneath Orion's belt. When I woke hours later, delirious with heat, I'd find them farther along, still aflame and somehow more familiar. Always by morning they had vanished. For a while I thought them a dream. I asked, but no one could say why they burned or what the Ethiopians might be doing upriver. Soon I thought better of it and stopped looking for answers. Mystery keeps better than fact, and I wanted those nights blazing. // #laketurkana #omoriver #daasanach #kenya #islet #canoe #natgeo #onassignment with @randyolson +@natgeo // See the series: #jadeseaseries2014

became a hook that allowed me to revisit work I had done on the island in 2008.

I searched my archives for photographs, then dug into notebooks to find stories to pair with them. Because the material was several years old, I acknowledged this in a dateline at the top of each post, and I wrote them in the tradition of travel narratives. In one, I described driving through Cuba in a rental car, picking up every hitchhiker I found, including one of the most beautiful women I'd ever met, a former Cuban soldier with a long, dark scar on her face.

I also wrote about a poor farmer who quizzed me on the prices of cars, bicycles, and houses in America. And, using a first-person structure, written in paraphrase, I told the story of a veteran of Fidel Castro's campaign in Angola during the 1980s, when he sent thousands of troops to fight for a Communist regime. It was a story that's almost invisible in the United States. It's also evergreen—a rough Cuban analog for America's war in Vietnam—and while it enthralled me, I'd be hard-pressed to place it in a glossy magazine.

More recently, news has been a presence, but not a directive, in a series I wrote from Iraqi Kurdistan (including a piece about an ISIS fighter I met) while on assignment for National Geographic, and in a vignette about a young migrant from Gambia who was trapped by bureaucratic goodwill in Sicily.

Over the last two months, I've also completed a new kind of Instagram collaboration with Randy Olson, my partner from the Kenya fieldwork. Ahead of the August release of our magazine story on Lake Turkana, we revisited previous work we did in 2009 just north of the lake and within the same watershed. In a flashback series, we paired my writing with Randy's photography, and we included bylines atop each post. When the Lake Turkana story was published, we posted another series comprised mostly of stories and images that did not appear in the magazine. We ran these series across several Instagram accounts, including National Geographic's, offering greater ecological and cultural context—or just lunchtime reading—to an audience of millions.

This collaboration, designed for mobile phones and tablets (though my dad is still using a laptop to view it), has been incredible so far—at least on a personal level. The response (likes and comments, maddening and addicting) has been overwhelming, and

our stories have been shared and reposted more than 1,000 times. What it shows is that our audience is time-agnostic. The age of the stories isn't an issue. It's the voice of the pieces, and the connections made between word and image, that matters.

All of this is lots of fun, but it's still work. For now no one's paying us to do it. National Geographic is happy to let us run our experiment, but it's a labor of love. I've also been asked recently if Instagram is cheap, trivial, not a venue for doing serious journalism. I'm always a little puzzled by this one—

I mean, hey, go do whatever you want—but like any social media app, Instagram reflects the community that uses it, which in this case is about as large as the population of the United States.

The writer Jeff Sharlet created an amazing profile, made just for Instagram, of a woman left virtually alone in her struggle with mental health problems. Jonathan D. Fitzgerald, a Ph.D student at Northeastern University, is studying how Instagram narratives work and building an archive of them. Randy R. Potts uses the app to write about



### “Commanding the Spirits of Illness Away”

“I am a healer of last resort,” Galte Nyemeto said. “When nothing else has worked people come to me.” Even at rest her mouth shrinks into a tough pucker and the bridge of her nose collapses into a chevron of wrinkles. I met her as she treated a patient short on hope. For two days, each morning and evening, Galte accompanied the gaunt young woman, Setiel, to [Lake Turkana in Kenya] for a traditional cleansing. She washed her, then smeared mud along the X-ray angles of her shoulders and arms. “Badabl!” Galte said, again and again, commanding the spirits of illness away. A first treatment had not restored Setiel so Galte was starting over when we accompanied them to the lake. Four treatments she would give with the ancient mud, four being an auspicious number to the Daasanach people because it counts the teats of a cow, most valuable of animals. After the first morning's treatment was complete, Galte helped Setiel up from the water and together they waded toward shore. “We won't look back,” Galte said, her shoulders set. “Because we have left the bad spirits behind.” I turned, though, and found only heat and stillness. A pair of birds stood unmoving in the shallows, their bodies white and gleaming. // #daasanach #laketurkana #tradition #natgeo #onassignment with for @natgeo with @randyolson // See the series: #jadeseaseseries2014



gay life in Texas. Journalist Blair Braverman shares stories about dogsledding and cold, lonely landscapes. The TSA posts images of things confiscated at airport security, revealing how many people try to bring grenades onto airplanes. And I've been corresponding with an Iraqi student who uses Instagram to post poems, in English, about the everyday violence battering through his life and the lives of his family.

Do these uses make Instagram—and related mobile platforms, like Facebook, Snapchat, Vine, or Twitter—sound trivial, or not trivial? The answer, of course, is yes.

The more I use the app, the more I see possibilities where it might be used non-trivially. In mid-June, I read a story in the L.A. Times entitled “San Bernardino: Broken City,” with words by Joe Mozingo and photographs by Francine Orr. As a newspaper package, it provides a fine, compelling narrative, and the paper built a Web page to house the project, including space for discussion and comments, but when I searched the Times’s feed on Instagram, I found only a few slim posts related to it.

If Mozingo and Orr are anything like me, they came away from their reporting with notebooks and hard drives full. I loved their work, and wanted more. Imagine how “extra” interviews, characters, or scenes—stuff that didn’t make it into the final cut—might be used on social media to enhance links to the print piece or create a stand-alone series from San Bernardino. What other audiences might the Times have reached? What other stories might they have told?

**A**NOTHER EXAMPLE OF opportunity appears in The New York Times, which earlier this year launched a series called “Assignment America.” The header for the first two stories, described them as “exploring changes in American politics, culture and technology, drawing on the reporting and personal experiences of New York Times journalists around the country.”

Sounds excellent, the sort of project many writers would love to join. And the simple use of the phrase “personal experiences” seems to crack a door the Times opens mostly hesitantly. The Times has done more with Instagram than many papers and magazines, linking its feed to a dedicated Web page where viewers can find stories that stand with the photos.

## On Instagram, what matters isn't the age of stories but the voice that is heard

Have editors at the paper considered using Instagram for other kinds of word-picture packages? The Assignment America series is young, and perhaps it won't last, but it seems to hold great potential for social media storytelling. A quick look reveals the hashtag #assignmentamerica has been used only a handful of times, and never by the Times itself.

There are, of course, legitimate editorial concerns surrounding Instagram, which is owned by Facebook. Though users maintain ownership of their content, control over it is lost as their photos can be reused and reposted by others. But at a time when mobile presence is crucial and tight-fisted approaches to content are waning, what does the L.A. Times lose by sharing more of Mozingo's and Orr's work, especially when the main feature is accessible for free online? What might The New York Times gain by opening up their series on America—with all the chaos and democracy it suggests—to short, mobile storytelling?

Perhaps institutional fear keeps this kind of work off Instagram. Or the simple busyness that swamps newsrooms. My own editors at National Geographic—which has more than 30 million followers—support my Instagram project but still don't really know how to bring it under the brand. Lately there's talk of changing that, but it's not clear how or when it'll happen.

It would be a mistake to think that this kind of short-form writing can replace deeply reported, well-planned narrative nonfiction. I've said before that Instagram work shouldn't be like newspaper writing, or even magazine writing. And I don't suggest writers junk their long-form dreams. We're talking, after all, about stories best read on phones.

Writing for Instagram is different and should be approached with a distinct, possibly purer, purpose—the joy of finding

and telling. Writers trained to observe and collect, test and analyze, have an awesome opportunity on the app to see how those skills might be applied to mobile storytelling. Later this year, I'm planning to begin another experiment at the Virginia Quarterly Review to see how far it might go.

With my colleague Jeff Sharlet and our editor Paul Reyes, we'll curate a project that will regularly feature writers on the magazine's Instagram feed. Each will post between three and five short, true pieces on subjects from many corners of the United States and, we hope, the world. They'll be paid a modest amount, and their pieces will be assembled into an essay, which will be housed on VQR's website. The best of this work will also be published in the print edition of the magazine.

This will be narrative at its simplest—the writer as observer, correspondent, communicating from a place our audience probably hasn't experienced. Far as we know, it'll be the first project of its kind. We're not sure how it'll turn out. To be sure, it's far less about Instagram as a brand than it is about our desire to tell and share stories, particularly from places and people who've been missed in the mainstream. There are several apps we might have chosen. The pace of mobile innovation suggests there'll be more coming. For now, though, Instagram is a tool that can gather and distribute stories more widely than many other kinds of social media. And, we simply just like it.

I was reminded of the particular power of the app in February, during a visit to Instagram's Silicon Valley headquarters, where I gave a workshop on writing short true stories. On a cool afternoon I sat listening to David Guttenfelder describe his love of Instagram, the billions of images, each reflecting a little square of light. Guttenfelder, a former AP chief photographer for Asia who has more than 800,000 followers on the app, was showing his photographs from Japan, Montana, Iowa, North Korea, and elsewhere. He said Instagram has changed how he thought about sending his images into the world.

“This is the biggest, most important platform out there,” he said. “The reach of this thing is incredible. More people see my work on Instagram than will ever see it in a magazine like National Geographic.”

My first thought was to agree. My second was to wonder how to get more writers involved. Soon, at VQR, we'll be looking for answers. ■



# War Is Personal



**How social media brings home  
news of faraway conflicts**

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANASTASIA TAYLOR-LIND

*Previous spread: Olen, holding her baby Ostap, and Serhiy are among the mourners and protesters in “Maidan: Portraits from the Black Square.” Taylor-Lind’s focus on individuals emphasizes the personal toll of the deadly unrest in Kiev, Ukraine in 2014*

I’M STANDING HALFWAY UP Hrushevskoho Street on a frosty February morning in Kiev. It’s -13 degrees Celsius, and I’m chain-smoking with my friend and fixer Emine. It makes us feel warmer while we wait for the Euromaidan protesters, who in 2014 occupied Kiev’s Independence Square, known simply as Maidan, demanding closer ties to the European Union and an end to government corruption, to pass my makeshift portrait studio on the way to the front-line barricade.

A tall man in his mid-30s strides past in a camouflage jacket, his face blackened by soot from burning tires. I cheerfully call out to him, “Hi, I’m Nastya from London. Can I make your picture?”

His name is Oleg, and I photographed him twice, on this day and again after the worst day of violence on February 20, which became known as “Bloody Thursday,” when snipers opened fire on protesters fighting security forces loyal to the government, killing about 50 people in a few hours.

The second time I photographed Oleg was different. When we saw him again, he hugged each of us, tightly, unusual for acquaintances in this part of the world. Many men changed like that, as if after all the blood and death they had seen they needed to touch the living and to feel touched and alive themselves. We also felt the trauma of the violence, and touch comforted us, too.

During the 2014 Ukrainian uprising in Kiev, I made a series of formal analog film portraits of male protesters like Oleg and female mourners in that makeshift portrait studio. This work formed my first book, “Maidan: Portraits from the Black Square,”

published later that year. But knowing that it would be weeks until the film was processed and scanned in London and weeks more until even I could see the images, I also mounted an iPhone over the viewfinder of my medium-format Bronica camera, recording videos of my interactions with each subject as I made their portrait. These videos omitted the portraits themselves; the shutter firing obscured the actual moment the film was exposed. The videos show everything except the photographs.

The moments that take place between photographs are usually not recorded, and are easily forgotten by the photographer. But I was able to share these moments directly from Maidan via Instagram, using the same device on which the images were made.

Traditionally, what ends up in printed media was considered the “real work.” Today, social media platforms like Instagram give me the chance to broaden the scope and depth of my storytelling by including what goes on behind the camera, images that otherwise would end up on the cutting room floor or, like the videos of my subjects, would never be captured at all. I am also able to reflect on and respond to viewers’ reactions to my images in real time, while still in the field.

The changing landscape of journalism has forced many of us to change the way we tell stories. I have no choice but to experiment with new tools that technology has gifted me. Social media broadens a journalist’s reach and scope. It allows professionals to share experiences immediately and directly with their audiences. It also allows

consumers of images to interact with and influence the creator. This is an enriching experience, for the audience, which feels an increased closeness to events without the middleman of a newspaper or media outlet, and for the photographer, who can learn what moves people to engage with a given subject. This is direct and personal storytelling. Most exciting for me, it can be a way to engage and include the people in the pictures and the communities from which they come.

My work in Ukraine looks at the domestic landscape of war in the country. Media coverage of the conflict, in which Russian-backed rebels are fighting the Ukrainian army and various pro-Ukrainian militia groups for the separation of the Donbass region, is hugely distorted. Most images depict the Eastern, war-affected region of Donbass, leaving the vast majority of the country undocumented. As a result, one could be forgiven for thinking that the whole of Ukraine looks like Chechnya during the 1990s. But in most of the country life goes on as normal, and the war is not visually present.

I am interested in visualizing this unseen war inside the home, the invisible concepts of normality, familiarity, and violence inhabiting the domestic space. Here, the tentacles of war spread out across the entire country, entering every home and every living room. In most places, you can hear and feel the war, but you cannot see it. I am working with a combination of traditional analog and modern digital storytelling techniques, experimenting with the way social media enables me to make war stories much more personal, immediate, and impactful.

## Social media broadens a journalist's reach. It allows professionals to share experiences directly with audiences. It also allows consumers of images to influence the creator

The Maidan videos were intended to be Instagram vignettes of my experiences as a photographer, an intimate look at how I see the world. They show how I saw the men of Maidan: 6cm x 6cm, through the camera's frosted ground glass, their reflections reversed by the mirror, moving and speaking to me, with the sounds of the revolution all around us. These images break the rules, showing what traditional photojournalism does not have space for: the photographer's voice and interaction with subjects.

In May, I created an installation at Four Corners Gallery in London, displaying the videos on iPhones, placed under the camera viewfinders, next to prints of the Maidan portraits—a marriage of the digital video experience with the analog process of shooting film. Bringing videos, created specifically for dissemination via social media, into a traditional gallery context brought the project full circle.

Later that month I returned to Ukraine, utilizing social media to relocate the men

and women in "Portraits from the Black Square." I found 10 subjects, visiting some at their homes to deliver gifts: prints of their portraits. Of course, I documented this process through social media, too.

I had tried to document the war in Donbass last summer, making pictures like I usually do: pictures of the war that look like the war, pictures where men and women become "victims," the "war wounded," or "collateral damage." When I edited these pictures afterward, they failed to move me because they looked like characters from a war story, a story set in a place that looked like a war zone, a place and a people that were unlike me. These images looked so foreign and exotic it was hard for me to imagine that this kind of violence could be visited on *my* hometown, on *my* family, and in *my* life.

In Ukraine, people always tell me, "We never believed this could happen here." I've heard it before in other places, too. War is always unexpected. It always arrives to the disbelief of the people whose lives it destroys. The photography critic Val Williams wrote in "Warworks," "War photography has always been a parody of real war." So, how can I tell a "real" war story? Welcome to Donetsk is my answer.

Welcome to Donetsk is a series of postcards of the capital of the Donbass region that depict peaceful scenes of the city before the war, with the words "Welcome to Donetsk" written over the image. They are real tourist postcards, produced before the war arrived. In these cards Donetsk looks like an ordinary, peaceful European city, like anyone's hometown, like my hometown.



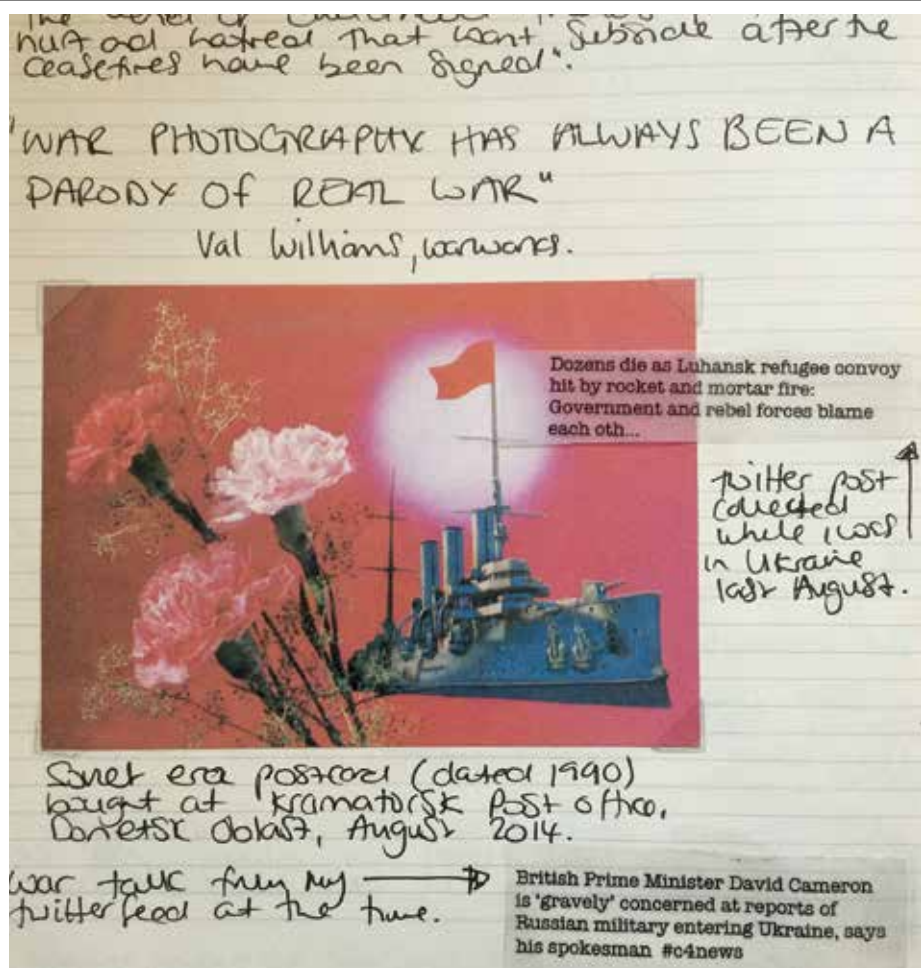
A contact sheet from Taylor-Lind's series of photos of mourners in Kiev, Ukraine

When I look at them, I understand that war is something that happens to ordinary people just like me, before the media reduces them (or us) to refugees and civilians and combatants, the lead characters in media stories around the world.

I came across these postcards in a post office in Slovyansk and was moved to buy them and photograph them for Instagram. The owner of the company that published them closed his business and moved abroad because of the war, but I arranged to buy his remaining stock, which was stored in his mother-in-law's basement. I traveled to Donetsk to collect the postcards, a grueling, checkpoint-filled, 17-hour journey by train and taxi from Kiev across the frontline.

**B**ACK IN KIEV, WITH ALMOST 1,000 postcards, I began mailing them all over the world, to people whose addresses I collected via social media outreach. My request for participation stated only that I was sending postcards as part of my new project about the war in Ukraine, inviting people to send me their postal addresses if they would like to receive one. Like the Maidan work, this project also merges digital and analog techniques by using mass communication social media tools to reach specific individuals with a unique and deeply personal story. By the time I finished, I had sent 921 postcards, sharing photographs of some of the cards on Instagram using the hashtag #welcometodonetsk.

I wrote each card by hand. On the front is an idyllic image of Donetsk. On the back



A page from a notebook with Taylor-Lind's research and reflections on her project in Ukraine

is the name of one of the 7,962 people so far killed in the conflict, the U.N.'s latest official count, and the date and the place where they died. I list the names of combatants from both sides of the conflict, civilians and jour-

nalists, although they are never identified as such. On one side of the postcard is peace, on the other war—but in the same place. If news reports, statistics, and the soulless linguistics of conflict cannot make war per-

# In over a decade as a photojournalist, no one had ever before written to tell me that they placed one of my photographs in their living room and lit a candle for the person in the picture



*Taylor-Lind used a black backdrop for her portraits, with Emine Ziyatdinova holding a reflector*

sonal, maybe one name can, one name I will write just for you.

“Valentina Shirokaya was killed in Donetsk on Thursday the 22nd of January 2015”

When Robin Lacey in Totnes, England

received his card, he shared a smartphone picture of it and wrote on Facebook: “It is one thing reading or listening to the news, quite another when its personalization lands on your doormat.”

When her postcard reached Cory Zapata in San Diego, her son brought it into class and she gave a short lesson using my pictures about the war in Ukraine and the situation of the country’s internally displaced persons (IDPs). On Instagram she told me, “The [number] of IDPs in Ukraine is equal to the population of our city of San Diego, CA. #warispersonal [The postcard] really brought it home for them because our victim was their age, 8 years old. Thank you.”

Shirley Field received a postcard in Tiverton, my hometown in Devon, United Kingdom. She lit a candle on her sunlit windowsill to remember Olga Shudikina, who was killed near Volnovakha on Tuesday January 13, 2015.

Shirley was the first to remember and mourn the person who died in this very personal way, but as the weeks passed and the postcards have arrived at the homes of people in more than 60 countries, recipients have been lighting candles all over the world: Aislinn Delaney in Ireland, Alison Stieven-Taylor in Australia, Marco Franciosi in Italy, Gisele Cassol in Brazil, Muzzafar Suleymanov in New York. In more than a decade of being a photojournalist, no one had ever written to me to say that they cut out one of my photographs from a magazine, placed it in their living room, and lit a candle for the person in the picture.

David Niblock’s postcard, which commemorates Francesca Davison, who was killed near Grabovo on July 17, 2014, arrived on the first anniversary of her death. David, who lives in London, Googled Francesca’s name and found out that she died onboard



*For Taylor-Lind's Welcome to Donetsk project, she sent 921 postcards, each bearing the name of a person killed during the war in Ukraine*

MH17, the plane shot down over Grabovo in eastern Ukraine. “The card arrived on the 17th of July, the anniversary of Francesca’s death aboard flight MH17 when it was destroyed in Ukrainian skies,” he wrote on Facebook. “I am humbled and saddened ... and taking a moment of silent reflection.”

These postcards do not deliver the news, nor do they provide much information at all; what they do is provide a catalyst for research, engagement, and conversation within foreign homes. Laurence Butet-Roch in Canada e-mailed me to say, “When I re-

ceived the postcard, I was saddened by the news it delivered. Wanting to know more about the deceased, I turned to the closest research tool I had: Internet. In only a few clicks I found out that Nikita Rusov was a hip-looking 12-year-old and a seventh-grader. I also came across a gruesome video of the shelling’s aftermath. My thoughts are now with his family and friends.”

On the postcards, the names of once peaceful Ukrainian towns—Volnovakha, Gorlovka, Saur Mogila, Debaltseve, Grabovo—became ugly words, loaded with knowledge of the recent violence there.

These are juxtaposed with the quaint, peaceful names of the towns to which the cards were sent—Pleasantville, Richmond, Arlington, Stanton Drew, South Sea, Annandale, Wetherby—sweet-sounding, idyllic names of places where the inhabitants are sure war will never reach. And written below them, the street names that represent the aspirations of the local communities: Valley View, Apple Creek Lane, Edenmore Avenue, Rainbow Drive, Elmfield Terrace, Daffodil Way.

As the postcards continue arriving at people’s homes, recipients photograph them



## Though I am no longer working in Ukraine, I will continue collecting the names of those who die in the conflict. My aim is to create and translate into English a list of the dead from all sides



*The postcard recipients, living in the U.S., India, and elsewhere, made their own memorials to the war dead and posted pictures on social media*

in their own domestic spaces and share on social media the names of the people killed. On Instagram many recipients also use the hashtag #warispersonal. One user, Carlos Franco, wrote, "I received your postcard this morning here in Sao Paulo, Brazil. Proud to join this network to say to the world that every war is personal, and stupid."

The response to this work has been overwhelming: so many emotional responses from recipients, sometimes reflecting on their own experiences of bereavement; seeing them perform small intimate acts of remembrance for people they have nev-

er met; the way they have used the postcards as a catalyst to spread the news of the Ukrainian war in a very personal way to their family, friends, and social media community. Unexpectedly, the project has also reached many Ukrainians. I posted only 26 cards inside Ukraine, a few times to IDPs from Donbass and one to a soldier in the Ukrainian army. Ukrainian media have also reported on the project.

Though I am no longer working in Ukraine, I will continue collecting the names of those who die in the conflict. My aim is to formulate and translate into English

a comprehensive list of the dead from all sides, something that does not yet exist. A friend in Ukraine collected another 2,000 postcards for me so that I can continue the project. My hope: to keep writing postcards until the war ends and I have recorded the name of every person to die in it.

It is our challenge to find new ways to engage people with what is happening in Ukraine. If people don't care about the war, it is our job as journalists to tell stories in ways that make them care, in ways that move them and evoke empathy or connection. This is one small attempt to do that. ■



THE FIRST TIME I INSTALLED AN AD blocker on my browser was in 2006. I don't remember how I heard about Adblock Plus, but I do remember feeling a rush of satisfaction as the ads disappeared.

I clicked around the Internet, smugly appreciating the commercial-free space I'd created for myself. But it wasn't long before I landed on the website for my own employer, the tiny independent magazine Sustainable Industries. When I did, I felt a guilty, sinking feeling. I wasn't seeing ads there, either, and I knew quite well those ads helped pay my salary.

I uninstalled the plug-in.

For years, publishers argued the same message that convinced me to turn off my ad blocker: Free content isn't free; it's subsidized by advertisers, who want to get their messages in front of users. But increasingly, users say, they're the ones paying for the ads:

with their privacy, their patience, and their mobile bandwidth. What they're not paying with is the currency advertisers would most like them to spend: their attention. Instead, they're tuning out ads or turning them off entirely.

In June 2015, an estimated 198 million Internet users around the world were blocking ads, up from 39 million in January 2012. Those data points come from the most recent annual trend report produced by anti-ad blocking software maker PageFair. The report estimates that 6 percent of global Internet users, and 16 percent of those in the U.S., were actively using ad blocking by June 2015.

These aren't big numbers—yet. But PageFair estimates that global ad blocking grew 41 percent in the past year, and even faster in the U.S. and U.K. Apple's recent approval of the sale of ad blockers for Safari on

iOS 9 opened the door for mobile ad blocking and boosted the visibility of ad blockers, generally. It's likely to accelerate the trend.

The growth of ad blocking is a risk for digital media, because it threatens to slash revenues publishers can ill afford to lose. Shrinking revenues and tighter margins are pervasive across the industry, pinched in part by the failure of growth in digital income to offset losses among traditional channels. "This is not the time to take money away from a publisher, not a single dollar," says Adam Singolda, founder of content-marketing ad network Taboola. "This is not a good time to say, 'Oh, it's just 5 percent of your revenue.'"

Publishers' response to ad-blocking users has been almost entirely punitive. Some try to block ad-blocking users from seeing the content on their sites, while others encourage ad-blocking users to whitelist their

**As the use of blocking technology accelerates, publishers are exploring ways to serve up ads users actually want to see**

BY CELESTE LECOMPTE

# BUILDING BETTER ADS

sites with ad-blocking tools, or to contribute funds directly, through subscriptions, donations, or one-time payments. However, some publishers are saying “*mea culpa*.”

“Ad blocking is, in a way, our fault as publishers,” says Joy Robins, senior vice president of global revenue and strategy at Quartz. “As opposed to coming up with solutions to innovate around advertising, we sacrificed user experience for a couple of bucks on a CPM [cost per thousand]. When our users moved to mobile, we tried to do the same thing, where it’s even more intrusive. [Whether] it’s the ad format or the data being captured or the data use, it’s hard to love online advertising.”

Many across the industry echo Robins’ comments, including John Patteson, vice president of business operations at Fusion. “The tough thing is that we’ve brought this on ourselves,” he says. For a growth-stage company like Fusion, the implications are serious. “The monetization tactic that we intend to rely on—advertising—is certainly under siege, and we have the audience base most likely to be using ad blockers. This is something we really have to address.”

How to address it, however, is still up for debate, in part because there are two, very different problems to solve: “problem ads” and “the problem of ads.”

A large part of the media industry has treated ad blocking as a technical problem. In discussing their response to ad blocking, sources at several publishers and trade groups focused on the need for publishers to address the “root cause” of the ad-blocking phenomenon: their on-site user experience.

In an effort to embrace new interactive formats, capture growing user interest in video and visual media, or to increase revenue with more advertising per page or more precisely targeted advertising tech, publishers have stuffed their sites full of new, bandwidth-intensive components, no matter what device you’re on. For other companies, such as the Chicago Sun-Times, the integration of new technologies with legacy systems has also impeded site performance.

The problem is worse for mobile users. In October The New York Times reviewed loading times on publishers’ mobile websites and estimated the cost of those pages on typical mobile data plans. The results showed that many mobile websites load very slowly, and ad technology was the biggest, heaviest, slowest-loading content on many of those pages. In the case of Boston.com—

the worst of the sites tested by the Times—loading the advertising on the homepage cost users 32 cents and took 30.8 seconds, about four times more than the editorial content on the page.

**M**ANY LINK THESE PROBLEMS to the growth in ad blocking use. PageFair’s customers may be on the leading edge of the trend, but several publishers interviewed for this story said they’re already seeing double-digit ad blocking rates—some over 20 percent—and that they’ve seen substantial growth over the past year.

“The product experience has to be every bit as good as the content,” says Jed Hartman, chief revenue officer at The Washington Post. For the Post, that’s meant implementing a variety of tools and initiatives aimed at speeding up its websites for all users, including those with slow or limited mobile connections. Other digital publishers have also recently stepped up their efforts on this front. Slate has targeted a 75 percent improvement in page load times by the end of the year. Vox Media declared “performance bankruptcy” in May, announcing an effort to reduce its sites’ abysmally slow load times. Improving the technology used to deliver ads is one piece of that effort, but given data like that collected by The New York Times, it’s an important one. All of which raises the question: Why are the ads such a problem?

The online advertising ecosystem is vast and complicated. There are two primary ways in which publishers accept advertising: by making direct sales to a client or by adding third-party advertising tools to their websites. Direct sales are just that—direct. The publisher knows what ads will appear on their website, when, and under what conditions. They’ll know who made the ad and who to talk to if there are problems.

But when publishers don’t sell ads themselves, they use third-party services to fill those remaining spots. Third-party services use an automated bidding system to match ads with websites, based on whom advertisers want to reach, which audiences different publishers serve, and what rates both parties are willing to accept. Advertisers can target increasingly specific user profiles based on information collected through cookies placed on a user’s computer.

One of the most annoying—and simplest—examples of ad personalization is retargeting. Those creepy ads that promote products you’ve browsed or bought on sites like Amazon? That’s retargeting. When you visit a site, retargeting services load a cookie into your browser that remembers what you looked at. When you leave the site and visit another, the cookie tells ad networks to serve you up an ad for that same page.

This isn’t the only kind of tracking, only the most evident. Most sites use multiple ad networks, analytics tools, and social media plug-ins that keep tabs on users’ behavior on that site—and across the Web. This data lets the third-party services gather lots of data about an individual user, keeping track of the kinds of sites they visit, services they use, and more. That data gets used to deliver ads to those users and, in other cases, can be used to customize the creative of those ads.

The growth in third-party trackers inspired the Do Not Track movement. Most modern browsers have a “do not track” setting that users can enable; if turned on, websites and services are asked to disable cross-site tracking (and perhaps all kinds of tracking) of that user’s activity. In theory, it helps address many users’ concerns about data privacy. In reality, it is often ignored by websites. The Federal Trade Commission recommends that sites participate, but doing so is not mandatory.

Some industry watchers argue that the uptick in ad-blocking rates coincides neatly with the growth of ad personalization. That may not be just about data privacy, though. The tools that let advertisers target specific users also require more code in users’ browsers, bogging down page load times and opening the door for malicious ads that serve up viruses to unsuspecting website visitors.

Over the past decade, third-party advertising has grown dramatically, and it’s become increasingly sophisticated. There are now tens of thousands of ad networks, all targeting particular groups of sites with particular audience demographics. Ad exchanges emerged to help match ads from across multiple networks and agencies, executing complex bidding rules in real-time to serve up personally targeted ads within milliseconds of a user loading the page. In the interest of maximizing advertising revenue on their sites, publishers often have relationships with dozens of networks and exchanges. The system, in some ways, has been a victim of its own success.

The ease and speed with which ads can be added to a website has helped drive up the amount of advertising on the Web overall, driving down rates for individual publishers. Falling rates encouraged sites to add more ads, and advertisers got increasingly interested in reaching not just large audiences, but the right audiences. The PageFair report found that 41 percent of surveyed Internet users (and 57 percent of 18- to 34-year-olds) would consider using ad-blocking tools if the number of ads increased; a full 50 percent said they would be tempted to use ad blocking because of privacy concerns related to ad personalization. “Billions of dollars have poured into ad tech in the last few years,” says Jason Kint, chief executive officer of Digital Content Next, a trade group of digital publishers. “I would argue that none of it went to consumer value.”

Many in the industry agree, and there’s been a chorus of publishers, advertisers, and others who now argue that consumers don’t hate all ads; they just hate bad ads. “There’s definitely this tragedy of the commons issue where a few bad actors, a few really bad experiences at scale, cause people to install ad blockers,” says Kint.

But what are problem ads?

One survey of ad-blocking users yields a potential answer. According to Ben Williams, who heads up communication for Adblock Plus (ABP), 71 percent of ABP’s customers told the company in a survey that they would be willing to see advertising if it wasn’t intrusive, by which they meant: “It can’t pop up, pop under, or be deceptive,” says Williams. “It must be labeled correctly, and should not have attention grabbing images, should not disrupt your reading flow.”

It also can’t be malicious. While people who follow the industry agree that malicious ads are probably only a small part of the market, they have an oversized impact on the Internet as a whole because those few ads could appear anywhere among billions of pageviews, thanks to the ubiquity of real-time ad exchanges and third-party networks.

Addressing bad ads takes up an enormous amount of time for most publishers. Greg Franczyk, chief digital architect at The Washington Post, says his team has built dashboard and monitoring tools to track the performance of their sites, including the ads. They’re looking for ads that break their in-house style rules, as well as those that are slowing down the site for users. When they find ads that cause problems, they have to work with the advertising team to get the ads removed. The Post keeps track



## HOW PUBLISHERS SHOULD ADDRESS THE RISING USE OF AD-BLOCKING SOFTWARE IS STILL UP FOR DEBATE, IN PART BECAUSE THERE ARE TWO, VERY DIFFERENT PROBLEMS TO SOLVE: “PROBLEM ADS” AND “THE PROBLEM OF ADS”



of which networks consistently deliver ads that cause problems and cuts ties with the worst offenders.

IGN, a digital media company covering video games and entertainment, is even more fed up. “We’re just about at the point to forego a few million dollars in revenue to turn [third-party ads] off completely,” says Todd Northcutt, IGN’s vice president of product. Third-party advertising makes up a relatively small share of the company’s total ad revenue, and Northcutt says eliminating it would be at least partially offset by the costs associated with managing bad ads.

Ad networks and exchanges are the gatekeepers when it comes to ad quality and security. Many sources say they’d like to see more action on the part of major ad networks, like Google, to address the issue.

Part of the reason the third-party ad system grew so quickly is that the actual ad delivery system is almost entirely automated. Advertisers and agencies can upload their creative to the various networks and exchanges, where computerized systems check the ads for compliance with various technical and creative guidelines. For the most part, those systems work well enough to catch ads that break the various standards set by the ad networks and publishers. But a small number of ads that don’t meet that criteria slip through, and publishers say there’s an even larger number of ads that meet only the letter, not the spirit, of the policies.

Craig Spiegle, executive director of the Online Trade Alliance, says improving that review process would be a huge step forward for the online ad industry. He’d like to see networks implement a system that he compares to the TSA’s expedited security screening program for passengers considered low-risk. Ads from new advertisers or agencies would be reviewed closely before being loaded onto the server; over time, companies could earn positive reputations and gain faster, automated-review access to the system. Companies with bad reputations would be automatically rejected or flagged for manual review.

Most sources said they think it is unlikely that ad networks will take action to address the issue. Systems with manual review processes would be vastly slower and more expensive, pinching ad networks’ profits and driving up ad rates. “To put these circuit breakers in place breaks their model,” Spiegle says.

**P**UBLISHERS ARE FINDING SOME support in one unlikely place: the ad blockers themselves. Adblock Plus launched the Acceptable Ads Initiative, which allows some advertisers to bypass the ad-blocking filter with non-intrusive ads. Adblock recently announced it would join the program as well.

To get added to the whitelist, a publisher or an advertiser can have their units reviewed for compliance with this Acceptable Ads policy. For sites that want to unblock fewer than 10 million monthly ad impressions, joining the whitelist is free. But for companies over that threshold, it comes with a price tag. None of the company’s customers wanted to share what percentage of the unblocked revenue they’re paying to Adblock Plus, but it likely doesn’t come cheap.

Whitelisting decisions are shared in the company’s online forum, with examples of the unblocked ads. Among the approved units are Google text ads and “recommended articles” widgets provided by content-marketing firm Taboola, along with hundreds of other, smaller ad units submitted by publishers around the world. PageFair, which has criticized the Acceptable Ads Initiative, is also among the company’s whitelisted customers. Its text-based ads were added in January 2014.

Privacy Badger, a tool from the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), has a more narrow focus on addressing users’ privacy tracking concerns. Privacy Badger doesn’t block all third-party services running on websites; instead, it blocks services that it notices tracking a user across multiple sites. In practice, most ads on most sites disappear. But EFF is hoping the tool encourages publishers to adopt its recommended privacy policy. Sites that use that policy (which, among other things, mandates full, transparent compliance with Do Not Track) won’t see their ads blocked.

City University of New York journalism professor Jeff Jarvis has suggested a related solution. But rather than allowing yet another third-party group to come in and skim revenues from the advertising system, Jarvis says, publishers ought to launch or support their own system, with a custom whitelist for ads and networks that meet strict standards.

In the absence of action from the advertising industry, many publishers are taking matters into their own hands, which brings

us to the second issue that needs to be solved: the problem of ads.

Study after study returns dismal findings about the effectiveness of display advertising. There’s also a growing industry-wide concern about fraudulent ad practices, from bots that view and click ads to serving multiple overlapping ads in a single spot or counting impressions for ads that display on the page but not on the user’s screen.

Other changes have crimped digital display advertising even further. Today, many publishers’ own websites—and the display advertisements that appear there—account for a shrinking share of their total audience.

“If you put a banner ad on the site, you’re reaching 30 to 40 percent of the people who are reading the words we write,” says Seth Weintraub, founder of the Apple news site 9to5Mac. The vast majority of his audience follows the site using tools like Flipboard, Pulse, Google Newsstand, Instapaper, and Pocket, he says, “and we get zero revenue.”

Just as journalists are tuning their content strategies to reach users on social platforms, in mobile apps, and on mobile devices, their business-side counterparts have been trying to figure out how to reach users in these same venues. In most companies, the focus is on two strategies: developing native advertising and expanding distribution through social and mobile platforms.

Ad blocking is simply accelerating these trends. “As an industry, I hope we can see this as, ‘Don’t waste a good crisis,’” says Quartz’s Robins. She’s optimistic that the rise of ad blocking will push publishers to “focus on quality rather than continuing to commoditize.”

When Quartz launched in 2012, the team made the decision not to use any industry-standard ad units on its page, and it continues to sell 100 percent of its custom ads with an in-house team. The campaigns are rarely standard static images. For example, one recent campaign for GE offered users the opportunity to spin a globe and select colorful points from the map; each location pointed a different story about GE’s work. The Quartz ads are intended to be as compelling for users as the content produced by the editorial team. It’s been a successful model for Quartz, but even the best-designed display ads aren’t immune from ad blocking. If publishers use ad servers or analytics tools from

third parties, they're just as likely to have their ads blocked.

One better bulwark against ad blocking is native content. Different publishers have different definitions of native advertising, but many kinds of native ads are delivered not through an ad server, but through the same content management system or social platform as the publisher's editorial content. By focusing on developing content that is in the same format as the editorial content and matches the tone and style of the publication, publishers are promising advertisers access to their audiences in new ways.

From a technical perspective, native content is harder—if not impossible—to distinguish from the articles, charts, and social media posts among which it appears. Developing this kind of ad creative means having a very clearly defined audience and a very clear brand identity and voice. Many

premium publishers have launched major in-house efforts to provide those things as a service to advertisers.

"Media companies are morphing into digital agencies," says Gordon Borrell, a media business analyst. Many are launching new divisions entirely focused on creating branded content for customers. BuzzFeed, Vox Media (with its Vox Creative), Media General (with Advanced Digital Solutions), Hubbard (with 2060 Digital), Townsquare (with Townsquare Interactive), TEGNA (with G/O Digital), and even The Onion (with Onion Labs) are among the companies taking this route.

According to Borrell, this re-thinking of the relationship between brands and publishers is just beginning: "We are at the end of the golden age of advertising," he says. "Marketing is becoming much more entwined with the medium."

Distinguishing between editorial content, sponsored posts, and brand-affiliated content isn't just a difficult technical problem, though. It's also a difficult problem for many humans. Many publishers say they're focused on making native advertising as transparent as possible. Most emphasized that they're using clear labeling and branding signals to alert users to the fact that the content they're seeing isn't editorial.

Whether it's clear that they're ads or not, the question remains: Will consumers want to see those ads? John Patteson says Fusion is planning for a future in which some of its audience will continue to say, "These ads are not valuable." When they do, he says, it's best to assume they'll have the tools to eliminate and ignore those ads. "We're not interested in getting in an arms race," he says. Instead, "How do we think about what can we give them that's valuable?" ■



**“AS AN INDUSTRY, I HOPE WE CAN SEE THIS AS, ‘DON’T WASTE A GOOD CRISIS,’” SAYS QUARTZ’S JOY ROBINS. SHE’S OPTIMISTIC THAT THE RISE OF AD BLOCKING WILL PUSH PUBLISHERS TO “FOCUS ON QUALITY RATHER THAN CONTINUING TO COMMODITIZE”**

# LISTEN UP


How involving news consumers in the reporting process can improve stories and enhance audience engagement

BY OLIVIA KOSKI









**J**ULIA KUMARI DRAPKIN, a climate reporter, was living in Washington, D.C. in 2011 when she started noticing something odd about her lunch: Sandwich shops were being uncharacteristically stingy with their tomatoes.

She wasn't the only one to take note: "I kept hearing conversations around me; people were saying, 'Is it just me? What is happening here?'" Turns out a freak frost in Florida had wiped out most of the city's supply of the fruit.

The weather had, in fact, been weird that year. Over dinner she complained to some friends who worked for the Obama administration about the slow pace at which the government was responding to climate change. "What's the problem?" she remembers asking them. They shrugged, saying climate change was just too big an issue for legislators to understand its direct costs.

Drapkin realized that her friends in government faced the same challenge con-

vincing legislators to act that she did as a journalist in getting readers to care about climate change. In both cases, what was needed was to connect a global issue with individual stories, Florida's freak frost with the scarcity of tomatoes on your lunch. She wanted a space where citizens with climate- or weather-related questions and stories could share their experiences and engage in conversation with experts about what was really going on.

So Drapkin moved from D.C. to a rural town in western Colorado called Paonia to launch iSeeChange, a news project that involves ordinary people at every stage in the climate reporting process, at public radio station KVNF. In April 2012, she set up a text messaging service and went on air to ask listeners to submit their unusual observations and questions about the local climate.

Texts flooded in. Residents, many of them farmers, had observed environmental changes taking place over decades. The fire chief sent a text about fighting a wild-

fire in the snow in April, the earliest wildfire on record. Drapkin connected him with a researcher at California's Sierra Nevada Research Institute, who confirmed that others were seeing fires in snow, and that scientists were predicting that wildfire season could become a year-round phenomenon. One person wrote in with concerns about drought, which the iSeeChange team reported on weeks ahead of others. Another wrote in to report a dandelion blooming almost a month earlier than usual, and iSeeChange ended up reporting on the earliest spring in recorded U.S. history.

iSeeChange has since become a living farmer's almanac online, expanding to include stories from users all over the country. Drapkin plans to launch an iSeeChange app that will let users exchange information with NASA's Orbiting Carbon Observatory, which tracks carbon dioxide emissions. With the app she hopes to connect a sweeping scientific study to personal stories of people on the ground to generate new in-

terest in—and even insights into—climate change. “We know when things are right, and when they’re unusual,” Drapkin says. “If you give a space for that to live and verify it with science and journalism, people’s intuition does pay off.”

Drapkin could not have reported on the earliest spring in U.S. history without the residents of Paonia, and the residents of Paonia might not have realized that what they were seeing was historic without Drapkin. ISeeChange points to the power of an emerging form of journalism where professionals work side by side with audiences to find new insights into the world at large. It’s a departure from citizen journalism, which leaves reporting in the hands of well-intentioned amateurs, and user-generated content, which casts journalists as curators over material of widely varying quality and reliability. This approach treats audiences as collaborators in a professionally managed reporting process, deepening

audience involvement and even improving the quality of stories reporters produce.

It’s a shift in the way newsrooms think about “the people formerly known as the audience,” as journalism professor Jay Rosen described those who recognized the independent publishing power of the Web starting in the 1990s. While all major news organizations now see the importance of serving audiences who talk back through social media, it’s taken longer to realize the potential of using news consumers early in the reporting process. Audiences are typically only “engaged” once a story has been published, when social media teams push out links on Facebook and Twitter that they hope will go viral, or open up comments sections that often devolve into virtual boxing arenas. These engagement strategies do little to deepen the experience for audiences or reporters.

“I’ve been in newsrooms where they look at the audience as a consumer, a necessary evil, as opposed to a highly valuable

ideas contributor,” says Jennifer Brandel, the journalist behind WBEZ’s Curious City. The program, which invites Chicagoans to help decide which stories journalists pursue by letting them submit questions and vote on the ones they deem most newsworthy, launched in 2012, and since then she’s seen the idea of including audiences at the beginning of the reporting process go from being perceived as radical to logical.

Brandel suggests that inviting readers to ask questions yields more journalistic benefits than asking them to leave feedback in a comments section after an article is published. “Questions are a more neutral format where stories can start from,” she says. They can also lead to more original content, pushing journalists to pursue story ideas they wouldn’t have thought of on their own. Giving audiences a seat at the editorial table, as Brandel puts it, also makes them feel more invested and more likely to share stories, increasing traffic and brand awareness



*The Guardian* asked online for help recording all U.S. police killings, not just high-profile deaths like Freddie Gray, memorialized in Baltimore

for news organizations. She calls it “public-powered journalism.” With public-powered journalism, professionals continue to do the good work they’ve always done—reporting, verifying, and synthesizing complex information—but audiences are regarded not only as recipients but as resources to inspire and inform the work they do.

Brandel’s Curious City started as an experiment—to test whether audiences had good story ideas, and what would happen if journalists gave them some editorial control. “Some people think if you hand over power, your news will end up being all about Kim Kardashian and cat videos,” Brandel says. A search of the Curious City archives turns up no hits on Kim Kardashian, though there was a question submitted about cats: “What’s the deal with Chicago’s feral cats?” (The story didn’t get reported.)

Winning submissions range from “Does the recycling REALLY get recycled?” (Answer: sort of) to “Who cleans up the blood on sidewalks and playgrounds after shootings?” (Answer: it depends) to “Can the new governor undo the approved same-sex marriage bill?” (Answer: probably not). The news team curates questions for voting rounds that benefit the widest possible audience, playing the same crucial role they’ve always played: making sure information is accurate, relevant, and complete. The audience plays a new role—bringing in fresh perspectives and a curiosity that motivates the reporting. Curious City does more than solicit questions from audiences. It actually includes them in reporting trips, too.

One listener, Dan Monaghan, wanted to know how often taxis are pulled over and for what. He felt that many drivers were reckless, and assumed they must get a lot of speeding tickets. His question got selected thanks to his initiative rallying his friends to help with voting, and a few months later he joined WBEZ’s Odette Yousef in the field.

The experience completely changed his perspective on taxi drivers. After spending hours interviewing several of them, he realized that the traffic system works against drivers. It’s not speeding tickets, but parking tickets they face most often. They can also get tickets for dropping people off in high-traffic zones, where police sometimes wait around to issue tickets. Many of those tickets aren’t even issued in person, but by mail several weeks after the violation occurred. “That really upset me,” Monaghan says. He walked away from the experience with a new respect for the challenges cab drivers face, and a new understanding of how the stories he heard every day on the radio were created. “It was awesome to experience firsthand,” he says.

In March 2014, Christie Pettitt-Schieber asked whether the governor of Illinois could undo recent legislation making same-sex marriage legal in the state. Her curiosity was personal: She wanted to marry her girlfriend, and the state was electing a new governor in November. Reporter Alex Keefe brought her into the recording studio for several hours as they called civics experts and eight candidates to find the answer. They discovered that none of the candidates was willing to challenge what is fundamentally a legisla-

## AT CHICAGO’S WBEZ, ASKING AUDIENCES TO VOTE ON STORY IDEAS IS NOW VIEWED AS LOGICAL, NOT RADICAL

tive decision. So Pettitt-Schieber and her girlfriend could continue their search for the perfect engagement ring. Since the story is built around a real person with a specific motivation, it’s more relatable. “You get to hear the discovery process unfold,” says Keefe. “Audience members ask questions you don’t think to because you think you know the answer.”

On another Curious City reporting trip Keefe brought a frustrated Chicagoan named Andrea Lee in to interview an alderman named Walter Burnett. Lee wanted to know what an alderman’s job responsibilities are. Her question was inspired by her experience calling about several issues (recycling bins, basement flooding) that her alderman said he couldn’t help with.

As a political reporter in Chicago, Keefe was careful with and respectful of his sources, recognizing that he relies on them to do his job and may want to talk to them again for a future story. Lee, as an average Chicago citizen, had no such concerns. She went into the interview with no filter, telling Burnett exactly what she thought about his job and what she thought he could do better. “It was awkward, but fantastic,” says Keefe. Keefe, who now works at Vermont Public Radio, says that the Curious City stories he produced were the most fun he’s had as a reporter, but that it could be scary because as a journalist you relinquish a bit of control.

Few newsrooms would consider going to the lengths WBEZ does to involve listeners in its reporting, as rewarding as it’s proven. For the majority of organizations, audience interaction happens exclusively online. It’s tempting to think that because of this the journalist’s role has changed drastically over the last decade or two. There are a slew of new positions in the modern newsroom related to this new landscape—community



*WBEZ listener Dan Monaghan rode with driver Al Smith for a story he suggested about taxis*

editor, social media editor, and director of engagement, to name a few. But these jobs aren't actually that much different from that of a beat reporter in the 1980s covering a local neighborhood. From the perspective of public-powered journalism, every audience member is a potential source in the next breaking story, or a potential character in your next feature article, and Twitter and Facebook are the street corners where they hang out.

"We have journalists who specialize in mining the potential leads that come in from audiences," says Amanda Zamora, senior engagement editor at ProPublica. The organization, which launched in 2008, has a long history of involving audiences in its reporting. The leads often come from callouts on the website, which invite users to submit experiences that inform its investigations into everything from the use of Agent Orange in Vietnam to segregation in schools to discrimination against pregnant workers. "We don't necessarily know which question will gain traction," Zamora says.

**T**HROUGH CALLOUTS, PROPUBLICA can test the public's interest in a topic before putting a lot of work into it, meaning journalists don't waste resources on stories that won't get a lot of traffic. Some investigations take off, sparking the formation of a community that follows the story as it evolves. "Patient Safety," which explores medical malpractice in the U.S. healthcare system, has its own Facebook group with over 3,000 members and a database of 900 sources, people who have their own stories to tell and a personal interest in the reporting. "We have niche targeted audiences that pop up around our investigations," Zamora says. Advertisers covet that type of engaged audience, hinting at the business potential of the public-powered model.

A lot of newsrooms pay lip service to "audience engagement," and if it's an afterthought or feels like an obligation, the effort to engage will most likely fail. Journalists that instead recognize the audience as a resource, and engagement as a way to tap that resource, can use it to pursue otherwise impossible-to-report stories. The process begins in the same way lots of journalism begins: with a question.

Reporters at The Guardian wondered how many police killings occur in the U.S.

every year. Most deaths never make national news like the deaths of Michael Brown and Freddie Gray. The Guardian searched in vain for a reliable database that records the number and nature of deaths that occur at the hands of U.S. police. The only official government data comes from a voluntary reporting program organized by the FBI. Only 224 of 18,000 law enforcement agencies made reports in 2014. Evidence from academics and journalists who independently track police shootings suggest there's a major underrepresentation of the number of "justifiable homicides" committed by police officers.

So The Guardian launched The Counted, which tracks the number of killings with the help of a community it has built that connects reporters with people from regions of the U.S. to which they wouldn't otherwise have access. Almost every day, a counter on the website ticks up a notch or two, grimly tallying the number of people who have died. Below the counter is a chronological list of the names (when known), ages, and faces (when pictures are available) of the deceased. The number of deaths tracked so far in 2015 is on pace to top 1,100 by the end of the year.

Each death is visualized on a calendar and is clickable to reveal further details, such as whether the victim was armed, which police department was involved in the death, and how it occurred. People submit from all over the country, according to Mary Hamilton, U.S. audience director for The Guardian. She says there are people who submit multiple incidents, helping journalists with the legwork of scouring thousands of local news sources for death reports that might not have made national headlines. "Readers are one of the largest and most comprehensive resources we have," says Hamilton.

In addition to submitting tips through the website, readers can join a Facebook group to get updates and share information. The group has almost 16,000 members. Reaching potential sources through social media has been important for the project because many people who might have knowledge of an incident in the U.S. may have never heard of The Guardian, which is based in the U.K. "We wanted to reach people who care about police killings, not people who care about The Guardian," says Hamilton. As a result, The Counted is also building new audiences for the paper, another example of a fringe benefit of this approach.

Journalists already use many of the tools of public-powered journalism—Twitter, Facebook, e-mail, and Web surveys. "It doesn't take new resources, but a different deployment of resources," says Brandel. When she started Curious City, Brandel cobbled together a variety of tools such as Google Forms and PollDaddy to realize her vision. But she wanted something better. As a result of being accepted into the San Francisco-based Matter start-up incubator, she and her team were able to build tools designed for reporting. The result is Hearken, a Web-based platform built with the needs of newsrooms in mind. She hopes it will make it easier for media organizations around the country to connect with audiences in ways that enhance their work, and maybe even the bottom line.

Brandel has tested Hearken with a dozen public radio and news outlets with a community focus. "We want it to be scalable, and make sure it works," she says. A company called Chalkbeat is using it for education reporting, and local outlets like San Francisco's KQED and Seattle's KUOW have had success deepening engagement with Hearken-powered stories. Hearken stories at San Francisco's KQED got 11 times the pageviews of others, and average time on those pages was nearly five times the industry average, Brandel told Fast Company. Fifty-six percent of e-mails collected by WBEZ Chicago as a result of Curious City were new, meaning Hearken can create new doorways through which users can connect with an organization.

Hearken's embeddable modules are designed to engage audiences at a specific point in the reporting process, from pitch, to assignment, reporting, publishing, and feedback. The Curiosity and Voting Modules mimic the user question and voting forms used for Curious City. An Interactive Reporter Notebook tool is set to launch in the spring. Brandel hopes that media companies will embrace this form of engagement so that it becomes one of many ways organizations create stories.

Newsrooms recognize that audience engagement is key to business survival, and public-powered journalism provides a model for engagement that is good for business and for journalism. Involving audiences in the reporting process can help generate leads, test a story's traffic potential, enhance the reporting process, and lead to growth. But the greatest benefit has nothing to do with money. "Our readers make our journalism better," says Hamilton. ■

A close-up photograph of a woman with dark hair and a serious expression. She has several vertical streaks of red paint or blood running down her face from the inner corners of her eyes. She is looking upwards and to the right. In the foreground, her hand is visible, holding a black camera. The background is blurred, showing other people and what appears to be a camera lens.

# “IN MEXICO, THEY KILL YOU TWICE”

Despite violence, journalists  
innovate to get the story out

BY MONICA CAMPBELL  
XALAPA, VERACRUZ

*Demonstrators  
in Mexico City on  
September 26 mark the  
first anniversary  
of the disappearance  
of 43 college students  
from a town in  
southern Mexico*





IN NOÉ ZAVALAETA'S BEDROOM, there's a framed picture on the wall of the February 15, 2014 cover of *Proceso*, a leading news-magazine in Mexico. It features a photo of Javier Duarte, the governor of Veracruz, the Mexican state on the Gulf Coast. Duarte wears a blue police cap and his belly fills a white button-down shirt. The headline: "Veracruz: Lawless State."

For Zavaleta, it was a big deal to have a cover story in *Proceso*, known to be critical of the government. He lives in Xalapa, the colonial capital of Veracruz, and knows the state well. The cover meant national exposure—and exposure to great risk—for Zavaleta and Rubén Espinosa, the freelance photojournalist who shot the cover.

Duarte had long decried reporters who criticized his office, and Zavaleta's story did just that. He pointed to corruption scandals, rising cartel-related violence, and the death of journalist Gregorio Jiménez, who was abducted after taking his kids to school and found in a hidden grave days later. Although Jiménez reported on crime in Veracruz, state officials dismissed that as a motive. Zavaleta's article criticized the investigation and stressed this alarming fact: Since Duarte took office in December 2010, 13 journalists

have been murdered in Veracruz or killed shortly after fleeing the state.

In July, Espinosa, the photographer, became number 14.

He was found dead, executed along with four women, in a Mexico City apartment. All were shot in the head with a 9-mm pistol and showed signs of torture. The other victims included Nadia Vera, a student activist in Veracruz who also left the state because of threats. "I still can't believe it," says a jittery Zavaleta, sitting on the edge of his bed, near the desk that's his home office. "I haven't stopped working since Rubén died. I'm just going, going, going. I want to believe this hasn't happened, and that it's all just been a nightmare and that tomorrow I'll wake up and see Rubén."

Journalists have faced danger in Mexico for years, with their work putting them in the crosshairs of organized criminal groups. Community leaders, lawyers, and human rights advocates who question and investigate crime in Mexico become victims, too. In addition, journalists face less visible barriers—namely, the government's deep ties to the media. Radio and newspapers increasingly rely on the state, especially for lucrative advertising contracts. Yet some investigative reporters keep on reporting, defying the obstacles, and are part of a new

wave of journalists who are more independent, digital, and collaborative.

The risks have escalated, though, especially since 2006, when President Felipe Calderón launched a military-led attack on organized crime. That effort failed, and violence skyrocketed, as did threats against journalists. The 2006 murder of Brad Will, a New York-based independent journalist killed in the southern state of Oaxaca while covering anti-government protests, is emblematic. Will inadvertently videotaped his own death, as his camera captured pro-government men firing at the protesters and in his direction. Yet those men were not convicted of the crime. Instead, Juan Manuel Martínez, a baker who lived near the crime scene, was arrested, although officials could never produce a witness putting him at the site. After 16 months in prison, Martínez was cleared of murder and released. He told me it was "easier to implicate somebody like me than the real killers." Nine years on, Will's murderers remain free.

As the violence increased, in-depth reporting at mainstream papers in much of Mexico's north vanished. In 2008, in Ciudad Juárez, across from El Paso, cartels fought for control, and Armando Rodríguez, a top crime reporter for the city's *El Diario*, was shot in his driveway in front of his young





**Rubén Espinosa took this photograph of a 2012 protest in honor of slain Proceso colleague Regina Martínez. Three years later, he was slain**

daughter. I met Rodríguez shortly before he died. He was known for keeping a daily tally of the city's homicides, something local officials didn't track. That year, in a city of 1.3 million, the death toll topped 1,500, nearly 5 murders a day. He looked worn and said, "I feel like a war reporter, but there are no battle lines."

In 2012, Calderón's term ended. During his six-year administration, more than 100,000 people were killed or disappeared, according to the government's own reports. Under current President Enrique Peña Nieto, homicide rates are moving up again after a brief decline as cartels fracture and fight for drug routes.

In all, since 2000, 88 journalists have been killed in Mexico, according to Article 19, a U.K.-based press freedom group. Crimes are very rarely solved. Investigations tend to drag on, with prosecutors overloaded and operating in an antiquated system. Sometimes murder probes simply stop cold when they might implicate government officials. "Politics can get in the way," says Carlos Lauría, the senior Americas program coordinator for the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). "You'll see cases with strong evidence, but you won't see results." This year, Mexico took the eighth spot on the CPJ's Global Impunity Index, in between

Afghanistan and Pakistan. And with four journalists killed so far this year, Mexico has already doubled its 2014 death tally.

Espinosa's murder also marks a turning point. It is rare for a journalist to be killed in the capital. It shattered the city's safe haven image where, for the most part, journalists under threat could feel anonymous in a 20 million-plus metropolis. "We all felt the chill," says Alfredo Corchado, the Mexico bureau chief for The Dallas Morning News, though he makes clear that foreign journalists do not face the same threats as their Mexican colleagues. "I have a U.S. passport and can jump on a plane at any time," he says. Organized criminal networks do not

## THE MURDER IN JULY OF RUBÉN ESPINOSA SHATTERED THE IMAGE OF MEXICO CITY AS A SAFE HAVEN

want to test the U.S. government or risk any disruption of their businesses.

Local reporters like Espinosa face the greatest threats. His difficulties started in 2012, when a government official told him to stop covering a student protest or he would "end up like Regina," a reference to Regina Martínez, a Proceso reporter strangled to death at her home in Xalapa that year. Officials tied her death to a robbery, but Espinosa and other journalists were convinced that her crime reporting led to her death.

In May, Espinosa placed a small plaque in Xalapa's main plaza, outside the state government's offices. It read: "Regina Martínez Plaza," and was meant to pay homage and protest the investigation. A picture of the ceremony shows Espinosa, with short black hair and wearing a photographer's vest, carefully affixing the plaque while colleagues look on. "Espinosa called for justice in Regina's case again and again," says Norma Trujillo, who reports from Xalapa for La Jornada, a left-leaning daily. "He was a leader, but I was afraid for him." Soon after, Governor Duarte told journalists to "behave" and called them "rotten apples" that would soon fall.

In June, Espinosa finally left Veracruz for Mexico City. He had photographed a student

protest at which men attacked demonstrators with machetes. After that, he told friends that armed individuals were outside his home. “He got really scared,” Zavaleta says.

So far, the Espinosa investigation is sticking to a worn script. It looks like a robbery, say officials. But a photograph of one of the arrested men shows his face with a fresh black eye, possible signs of a forced confession in a country where the practice is common. Televisa, the country’s dominant broadcaster, known for its pro-government stance, said toxicology reports found Espinosa tested positive for marijuana and cocaine. Many saw it as a way to publicly discredit Espinosa. “In Mexico, they kill you twice. The first time with a bullet and then by character assassination,” says Corchado. The U.N. Office of the High Commissioner

for Human Rights has joined other groups calling for a new investigation. Duarte said the killings were “aberrant” and that he was confident the cases would be cleared up “as fast as possible.”

Journalists do what they can to protect themselves. Newspapers omit bylines and photo credits from certain crime stories. There is self-censorship, with reporters excluding names of cartels from their articles, especially in small regional publications. Swaths of the country are simply written off as no-go zones. And for many reporters, gone are the days of pursuing an “exclusive.” Today, more journalists team up and join tight-knit WhatsApp groups to stay updated on risks and their whereabouts.

Some of these rules apply for foreign journalists, too, with some going further

and tapping protocols still out of reach for most Mexican journalists. While reporting a recent story on children harvesting opium in Mexico’s poppy fields, Azam Ahmed, The New York Times Mexico bureau chief who moved from Kabul to Mexico City in July, regularly sent out his GPS coordinates to the Times’s security chief, just like he did in Afghanistan. “It’s not a war zone, but I didn’t want to be cavalier or complacent,” he says. “I want people to know where I was last.”

Mexican field producers working with foreign journalists who parachute in are also on alert to protect each other—and their sources. Ulises Escamilla, a Mexico City-based reporter who has helped produce stories for Al Jazeera, The New York Times Magazine, and the BBC, packs ski masks

FÉLIX MÁRQUEZ/ASSOCIATED PRESS

*In April, protesters demanding justice for the 2012 killing of journalist Regina Martínez gathered in Xalapa, Veracruz*



in his kit in case a source's identity must be protected. "I'll look at someone who is about to go on camera and think, 'No, no, no, we have to protect them.' We get to leave this town, but they'll stay behind," he says. "There's a lot of paranoia, but that's part of our defense."

There has been some response at the federal level to the danger. Laws now federalize press crimes so that the same local authorities accused of threatening journalists don't also lead the investigations. There is also a special federal prosecutor's office. But ongoing skepticism about investigations mar these efforts and damage the latest one—a new law and agency to provide threatened journalists and human rights workers with official protection in the form of security cameras, panic buttons, and safe houses.

Espinosa steered clear of the program, and many others do, too. "Why would you ask the government to protect you if the threats you face are linked to the state itself?" says Sandra Rodríguez Nieto, who reported on Espinosa's murder for the online magazine SinEmbargo. "You know what would make me feel safe? Don't offer me a damn panic button. Solve the case of one dead journalist. Just one! That would show us that you can't get away with murder."

Yet some journalists have signed up, like Norma Trujillo in Xalapa. After her colleague Regina Martínez was killed in 2012, Trujillo started shoving a chair against her front door every night. "If I heard a noise, I'd jump," she says. "That fear hasn't left me." She insists that the protection program "doesn't guarantee anything," but says she won't deny herself any safety measure.

**M**EANWHILE, OTHERS HAVE given up being in Mexico altogether. Félix Márquez, a photojournalist from Veracruz who has worked with the Associated Press and Proceso, left for Chile not long after Espinosa's murder. "I couldn't do my work without a guarantee of safety," he says. "It was best to stop for a while and take a break from Mexico."

Despite the fear and violence, a strengthening group of newer publications is taking hold. They include Animal Político, SinEmbargo, Diario19, Emeequis, La Silla Rota, and Más por Más, a free paper. Many are found exclusively online, testing new ways to stay afloat by tapping foundations, angel investors, and readers' donations. They also attract top reporters, who are breaking away from Mexico's traditional large papers and broadcasters, restrained by their ties to the state. "There is a big part of the press that operates under the government's shadow," says Darío Ramírez, Mexico director of Article 19.

That shadow is growing, too. The amount Peña Nieto's government spends on publicity has increased by 80 percent compared to previous presidents. "If you took away that spending, you'd see newspapers across the country vanish," says Ramírez. He calls this flow of non-regulated public money into news outlets the "bone cancer" of journalism. The grip keeps a pro-government narrative intact and investigations that uncover corruption buried.

## "IN MEXICO, THEY KILL YOU TWICE. THE FIRST TIME WITH A BULLET, AND THEN BY CHARACTER ASSASSINATION"

—Alfredo Corchado, U.S. journalist

The alternative outlets are breaking that hold. At a recent editorial meeting at Animal Político, editors and reporters huddled over how to cover a massive march in Mexico City to mark one year since 43 college students disappeared in Guerrero, the Pacific Coast state. The story of the missing students rocked the country. The planned march also coincided with an Inter-American Commission on Human Rights report that pointed to numerous holes in the government's official version of what happened. For Animal Político, the commission's report offered a rare chance to show their audience a side-by-side comparison of findings by an independent group of experts and the government's.

It was a stark contrast to the coverage (and nearly identical headlines) offered by Mexico's biggest papers, which framed the government's conclusions as fact and discredited the independent report's findings. Coverage of the Mexico City march was also buried. "We don't have much money," says Dulce Ramos, editor of Animal Político. "But to a certain point we prefer it that way, so we can do the coverage we want and keep our independence. There's an information vacuum, and we're trying to fill it."

New alliances among journalists are also bringing out investigative work that might not otherwise appear. In November 2014, a reporting team led by Carmen Aristegui, one of Mexico's most famous journalists, uncovered how Peña Nieto's wife had bought a white, Miami-style mansion from government contractors. Instead of breaking the story on her popular radio show, Aristegui and her team published the story on her own website, Aristegui Noticias, and worked with local and foreign outlets to carry it, too. "That alliance made the story bigger," says



# STATES OF FEAR

The 14 countries that lead the world in violence against the media

BY ELISABETH WITCHEL

WHEN THE COMMITTEE to Protect Journalists (CPJ) launched its 2015 Global Impunity Index—a survey of countries with the worst records for solving the murders of journalists—it was no surprise that Mexico held a spot among the top 10, as it has almost every year since the annual survey was first published in 2008.

What may appear more surprising was that this year Mexico registered a slight improvement, moving from seventh to eighth on the global ranking despite the fact that journalists have been murdered in Mexico nearly every single year of the last decade and in only one case has a suspect been prosecuted. Moreover, the pace of killing journalists is showing no sign of slowing down. So far, 2015 has recorded the highest number of murders in Mexico since CPJ began tracking data on journalist casualties in 1992.

A closer analysis of Mexico's movement down the list, however, is telling not of a significant improvement in Mexico's climate or successful prosecutions, but of a spread of impunity and violence against the media.

CPJ's Global Impunity Index ranks countries according to the proportion of unsolved journalist murders per million inhabitants over a 10-year period (September 1, 2005 – August 31, 2015). It includes all states with five or more unsolved murders—that is, when no suspects have been convicted or killed in apprehension.

The discouraging truth behind Mexico's change in ranking is that other countries are sustaining and/or increasing their high rates of impunity and new countries have joined the list. The entrée this year of South Sudan to the index at number five, following an ambush that killed five journalists in January, pushed Mexico and other countries down a notch.

Underscoring the increasing dangers of writing about religion and other sensitive cultural issues, five bloggers in Bangladesh have been murdered, four of them

hacked to death, for their online writing on these issues. Culture is also a common beat among journalists who have been targeted and killed in Somalia, which is number one on the index this year for the first time.

Worldwide, more than 360 journalists have been targeted and killed for their work over the last decade and the perpetrators get away with it in nine out of 10 cases. Anti-press violence and impunity cut across all regions but the phenomenon is surprisingly concentrated in a relatively small number of countries. The 14 countries on this year's index account for 83 percent of unsolved



"We Will Not Be Silenced" reads a front page in Mexico City after a journalist's murder in July

journalist murders worldwide during the last 10 years. Nine of these countries have, like Mexico, appeared on the index every year since the first edition in 2008.

There are some encouraging signs in the data. The number of convictions of suspects behind journalist murders, though still few and far between, has been higher over the last few years than a decade ago. This year there have been five convictions in journalist murders compared with one in 2005. Colombia fell off the index after holding a place for seven years. Though its improvement can be largely attributed to a general decrease in political violence and the government's protection program for journalists, some cases have been resolved, including the prosecution of the mastermind behind the murder of editor and columnist Orlando Sierra.

Meanwhile, the fight against impunity has been shored up by recent interest at the United Nations. It has called for states to address impunity by mobilizing governments, the media, and civil society and U.N. agencies. Now journalists and advocates must monitor progress. ■

## GETTING AWAY WITH MURDER

The CPJ calculates the number of unsolved journalist murders as a percentage of a country's population. It includes only nations with five or more unsolved cases.

	Number of unsolved journalist murders/ million inhabitants	Number of unsolved murders 09/01/05 – 08/31/15
1. Somalia	2.857	30
2. Iraq	2.414	84
3. Syria	0.496	11
4. Philippines	0.444	44
5. South Sudan	0.420	5
6. Sri Lanka	0.242	5
7. Afghanistan	0.158	5
8. Mexico	0.152	19
9. Pakistan	0.119	22
10. Russia	0.076	11
11. Brazil	0.053	11
12. Bangladesh	0.044	7
13. Nigeria	0.028	5
14. India	0.008	11

SOURCE: COMMITTEE TO PROTECT JOURNALISTS

OPPOSITE AND ABOVE: HENRY ROMERO/REUTERS

journalist Rafael Cabrera, who works with Aristegui. “Looking back, if we had just published it on our own, it might have been buried. I think that tethering these alliances, and pushing back together, is the best model for getting our work out there.”

Not long after Aristegui’s team ran the story on Aristegui Noticias, her radio station fired her and her reporters, saying its decision was based on the journalists’ unauthorized partnership with Méxicoleaks, a new information-sharing platform. Méxicoleaks is the first partnership among news outlets like Proceso, Animal Político, and, now, Aristegui Noticias, to share information about government and corporate malfeasance.

One recent tip led to a report showing how Peña Nieto and his staff overspent on five-star hotels during a European trip. “The idea is to give people a way to share information without a trace,” says Eduard Martín-Borregón, a Spanish journalist who works for the Project on Organizing, Development, Education and Research (PODER), a nonprofit corporate watchdog in Mexico City and a member of Méxicoleaks. “I mean, who is going to pass along information if it could get them killed?” But the whistleblower concept is still new in Mexico, hampered by fear and few examples of leaked information triggering change. “You see stories like Aristegui’s explode, but there’s no change, no legislative response,” says Ben Cokelet, who runs PODER. “Mexico doesn’t have a Watergate.”

The alliances are also building support networks where none existed. One national

## “WHO IS GOING TO PASS ALONG INFORMATION IF IT COULD GET THEM KILLED?”

—Eduard Martín-Borregón, Spanish journalist

group, Periodistas de a Pie, unites freelance reporters in parts of the country where independent journalism is rare and can be risky. Over the years, the network has grown to more than 70 collaborators, who also use secure messaging apps to notify one another of threats. There are also regular meet-ups in state capitals or in Mexico City to attend workshops on everything from investigative techniques to mental health counseling.

Daniela Pastrana helps lead the network from a modest building in Mexico City. Like many human rights and watchdog groups in Mexico, her offices are unmarked for security reasons. Working alongside Pastrana is Ximena Natera, fresh out of journalism school. She grew up watching the news on Mexican television and, after starting university, realized, “I had no idea what was going on in Mexico. I’d bought the narrative that all of the people who died in the war on drugs were criminals killing each other. I

realized that wasn’t so and that journalism was the only way for me to know what was happening in my own country. That’s what motivates me.”

But away from Mexico City, the atmosphere toughens. It’s a four-hour drive to Xalapa in Veracruz. As you near the city, vast cornfields give way to modest, one-story homes. Two new buildings stick out: the state courthouses. They are towering and gray concrete, and seem disproportional in a place where justice is scarce. Farther along, there’s Xalapa’s colonial downtown, narrow cobblestone streets lined with the typical mix of stores, offices, and cafes like La Parroquía, where Veracruz-grown coffee is served and hot milk is poured from an aluminum kettle. “I’m from here, this is home,” says Noé Zavaleta. “On the surface, things seem fine. We all try to live normal lives.”

But Espinosa’s murder changed his life. “I loved going out dancing, meeting up with friends at a bar, going to late-night movies,” he says. No more. He’s stopped drinking, too. “I need to stay alert. Instead of looking outside in the morning to see if I need a coat, now I see if there are any strangers outside.”

Why stick with journalism at all then? “I’ve thought about doing something different,” he says. “But I’m staying put for now.” And he continues to gather what documents he can on the cases of killed colleagues. He keeps count of their absence. “Today is day 73 without Rubén,” he says. “It feels cathartic to do that somehow.”

Journalist Norma Trujillo, also in Xalapa, is less sure about her future. She covers crime, prison conditions, and clashes between international corporations and local indigenous groups, and is often removed from government press lists. “My kids say, ‘Just stop reporting, mom. Enough!’ And my husband, he sees that I’m tired,” she says. “Sometimes, I think, ‘Okay, I’m done.’ I can do something else, something that pays more and doesn’t mean risking my life. But I’m not quite there yet. This is my calling.”

Later that day, in Xalapa’s main plaza, Trujillo shows me the stone step where, in May, not long before fleeing Veracruz himself, Rubén Espinosa led a group of other journalists to install the small plaque to honor Regina Martínez. The spot is empty, except for some smudged white paint. The plaque was stolen again. There are no plans to replace it. ■



Newsweekly Proceso took aim at Veracruz Governor Javier Duarte, calling the state lawless

## Best of Times, Worst of Times Will podcasting go the way of blogging— professionalized into big digital outlets and platformized into proprietary systems that control distribution and take a cut of revenue?

BY JOSHUA BENTON

**P**ODCASTING IS GIVING ME a case of déjà vu.

The state of podcasting in 2015 feels a lot like the state of blogging circa 2004. The variety and quality of work being done is thrilling; outside attention is growing; new formats are evolving. We're seeing the same unlocking of creative potential we saw with blogging, and there's far more good work being produced than anyone has time to take in.

The question now is whether podcasting's future will play out as the last decade of blogging has. There may be some lessons to be drawn—positive and negative—from how the beautifully fractured world of blogging evolved into what we have today.

And what is that, exactly? One part of that old blogging world was professionalized, spawning smart digital outlets like The Huffington Post, BuzzFeed, and Vice. Another, bigger part was taken over by platforms like Facebook and Twitter that promised technical ease. And the incumbent outlets that blogging threatened—print newspapers and magazines—ended up stuck in the middle: not savvy enough to compete with the new digital pros, not big enough to compete with the platforms.

The players are different with audio, but a lot of the pressure points are the same. Will we someday soon look back on 2015 as the golden age of podcasting, before the market had its way?

Let's look at those three trendlines one at a time. If you were somehow sentenced to listen to all the podcasts in iTunes, you'd find a lot of amateurish stuff.

With so much dross, quality stands out. The most downloaded shows are a mix of public radio's weekend magazine shows, smart comedy and storytelling, and well-produced talk.

So one move is in the direction of quality. Alex Blumberg, the public radio reporter who left to start Gimlet Media in 2014, describes what he's trying to build as the "HBO of podcasting." "We take more time, we spend more money, and we try to hone and craft more than 95 percent of the podcasts out there," he said earlier this year in an interview with the Nieman Lab's Shan Wang. "I think podcasting still has an association with something that two dudes make in their basement. There's a 'Wayne's World' connotation to it. But I think of them as shows: sleek, produced, where you have people who are good at it doing it."

Gimlet has built up an acclaimed lineup of podcasts that now regularly land on most-downloaded lists and which have smart integration of advertising. Other companies like Panoply (from the people at Slate) and Midroll (now owned by Scripps) are doing something similar, building up podcast networks that can both professionalize and make more efficient the production of on-demand audio. Gimlet may want to be another HBO, but to my mind, they're more of a new Vox Media—marrying content smarts, production skill, and an agile business strategy.

When it comes to platforms, podcasting has been a remarkably open one. All you need is access to a server and you can publish to the world.

I suspect we're going to see that openness come under pressure soon. Nearly all audio podcasts are MP3 files—the same format that filled up your iPod with Nelly



President Obama's appearance on Marc

and 'N Sync back in the day. Once they're downloaded, MP3s are opaque from a publisher's perspective: There's no way to tell if they've been played once, a hundred times, or never. Tracking individual listeners' habits—seeing what other podcasts they listen to, which ads they skip, or which episodes they bail out of early—is impossible for a podcast producer.

One possible reaction to that: Great! I don't want some rando podcast bro tracking my activity! But the Web has taught us that many people—especially advertisers—want that sort of data, and we can be sure that there will be attempts to harness it.

Doing so would probably require a new format for podcasts—something beyond the MP3. The Swedish start-up Acast promises an enhanced podcast experience by integrating images and video at points within an audio podcast—if you listen to certain podcasts within their app. Of course, that complexity can also be used to push more sophisticated advertising; Acast tells companies it can provide "dynamic targeting" of podcast advertising within a given episode.

The optimist's view of Acast (and other companies entering the space) is that the



**Maron's podcast "WTF with Marc Maron" raised the profile of the comedian's show**

empty-headed MP3 is limiting what podcasts can do, and that we need to move past it for the field to flourish. The pessimist would note that whatever promising new technology comes along is unlikely to be as open as the RSS-plus-MP3 tech at the core of podcasting. And that could mean private platforms taking over.

Marco Arment, who makes the popular Overcast podcast app for iOS, argues on his blog that this coming wave of companies aims to "lock down this open medium into proprietary 'technology,' and build empires of middlemen to control distribution and take a cut of everyone's revenue. *That's* how you make Big Money. And it usually works."

Look to blogging again. In the mid-1990s, if you had a blog, you probably wrote the code for it by hand. By the early 2000s, you likely used a Web host like Blogspot—

reducing technical complexity by handing over the backend to a company like Google. Fast forward to today and the vast majority of what would have been considered "blogging" 10 years ago now happens on social platforms like Facebook and Twitter.

Podcasting is open, but it's also complicated and limited by its technology. Some middleman will come along to improve that—and grab a piece of the business.

So where does this all leave public radio—the part of the business most important to those of us who care about journalism? NPR and its member stations have survived the digital transition better than most news outlets, but its broadcast audience has plateaued and there are troubling signs that it's losing younger listeners. Podcasts are part of that erosion, as commuters use their phones and connected cars to tune into "WTF with Marc Maron" instead of their local FM morning zoo, or "Reply All" instead of "All Things Considered."

Of course, many of the top-rated podcasts are produced by public radio outfits. But they're mostly still driven by the demands of terrestrial radio. Shows are an hour long because that's the only kind

of slot available on Saturday afternoons. They're produced by an expensive infrastructure that's tied to broadcast. They're limited in their flexibility because adding a new radio show usually means removing an existing one.

There are public radio podcast success stories: "Serial" most obviously, but also NPR shows like "Invisibilia" and "Hidden Brain." And several of the largest local stations are betting big on podcast production. (In October, WNYC announced a \$15 million project called WNYC Studios devoted to developing new podcast programming.)

But it's not hard to forecast the impact a shift from broadcast to podcast will have on public radio stations. There are over 900 public radio stations in the United States, and most of them are nothing like WNYC—they survive in large part as the best available delivery mechanism for national NPR content. In most markets, public radio stations face little to no real news competition on the dial. If "Morning Edition" becomes just one among many high-quality options for newsy audio during drivetime, what happens to the rest of their work—and their business model?

In newspapers, a few giants like The New York Times could respond to the challenge by building up top-notch digital teams and competing toe-to-toe with the newcomers. But there are nearly 1,400 daily newspapers in America, and most are being crushed by online competition. For all its successes, podcasting has offered no solution to the crisis of local news. I expect we'll continue to see the gap between the WNYCs and their smaller public radio peers expand.

The future history I'm outlining isn't all bad. For the listener, there'll be more great shows than you know what to do with. But the same trends we saw 10 years ago—professionalization on one hand, platformization on the other—sure seem to be playing out again. And that promises to disrupt yet another part of the journalism business—for all the good and bad that implies. ■

*Joshua Benton, a 2008 Nieman Fellow, is the founding director of the Nieman Journalism Lab*

**Newsy podcasts could pose a big challenge to NPR shows like "Morning Edition"**

## The Best Magazine for A Person Who Cannot Read

### In “Cast of Characters,” Thomas Vinciguerra, a founding editor of *The Week*, examines the early cartoonists who put their stamp on *The New Yorker*

BY THOMAS VINCIGUERRA

*THE NEW YORKER'S CARTOONS AND COVERS have been well-loved since its founding in 1925. It was Rea Irvin, the first employee (his title was “art editor”), who is responsible for the magazine’s visual character. Irvin created hundreds of New Yorker covers, including the very first and most famous—Eustace Tilley peering through a monocle at a butterfly.*

“**T**HE NEW YORKER EXPECTS TO be distinguished for its illustrations,” Harold Ross wrote in his original prospectus for the magazine, “which will include caricatures, sketches, cartoons and humorous and satirical drawings in keeping with its purpose.”

Considering that Ross was a prose man, he succeeded beyond his expectations. Ninety years after he put down those words, it is still received wisdom that the first thing a casual reader of *The New Yorker* will do is flip through and have a chuckle over the cartoons. The graphic legacy that Ross left is as significant as its journalistic counterpart:

*Excerpted from “Cast of Characters: Wolcott Gibbs, E.B. White, James Thurber, and the Golden Age of The New Yorker” by Thomas Vinciguerra. W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. Copyright © 2016 Thomas Vinciguerra*

New Yorker art set so lasting a standard that the magazine is now the only general-interest periodical left in the nation that still fills its pages with the sight gags that were once a staple of the industry.

Such durability and quality were evident almost from the beginning. As early as October 1925, when the magazine was still scrambling to find its audience, Ross noted, “Everybody talks of *The New Yorker’s* art, that is its illustrations, and it has been described as the best magazine in the world for a person who can not [sic] read.” Philip Wylie, one of Ross’s first permanent hires, recalled, “The one thing Ross had demanded till all heads rang with it—from early 1925 until it began to become fact, a year or so later, was this: ‘Get the prose in the magazine like the art!’” Ross eventually had plenty of worthy art to work with; before its tenth anniversary, the magazine was getting as many as a thousand drawings every week.

Following World War II, the figure was up to 2,500.

Part of the reason for this avalanche was the magazine’s ability to accommodate wildly different voices and styles. For many years at *The New Yorker*, its editors insisted that there was no such thing as a “typical *New Yorker* short story.” Assuming the assertion was true—and there are still many critics who would dispute it—the

same could be said about its cartoons. The simple and charming “Little King” illustrations of Otto Soglow had as little in common with the stuffy clubmen and devilish rakes of Peter Arno as the abstract musings of Saul Steinberg had with the affected suburbanites of Whitney Darrow, Jr. True, some of the magazine’s staple subjects and situations proved more durable than others. Today *The New Yorker’s* illustrated spoofing of cocktail parties, breakfast table conversations, precocious children, psychiatrists’ offices, corporate boardrooms, and middle-class neuroses is taken for granted.

It shouldn’t be. What Ross had in mind for the magazine, and what he accomplished, marked a radical departure from what had been appearing in *Life*, *Judge*, and similar titles, as Thomas Craven noted in his 1943 volume “Cartoon Cavalcade”:

Conceived in the spirit of the boulevards, *The New Yorker* departed from the old tradition of American humor, the tall tales and outlandish fables, which survive in the comic strips, and developed the funny idea with a witty, one-line caption to clinch the joke. The one-line caption had been used before, but sparingly and never with such originality and intelligence.

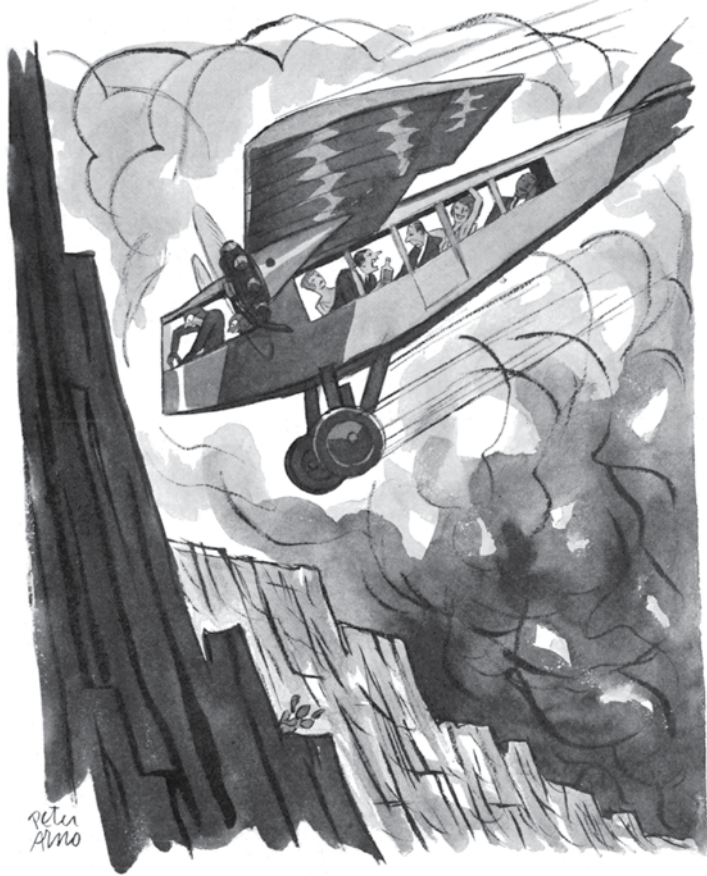
The most pointed drawings of *The New Yorker* present an idea or predicament that screams for clarification. The drawing alone, more often than not, is enigmatical, but in conjunction with the surprising title beneath it becomes explosively funny. And the fun is clean.

Even the manner in which *New Yorker* cartoons were conceived and executed was different, Ross told the artist Alice Harvey:

[B]efore *The New Yorker* came into existence, the humorous magazines of the country weren’t very funny, or meritorious in any way. The reason was that the editors bought jokes, or gags, or whatever you want to call them, for five dollars or ten dollars, mailed these out to artists, the artists

**The New Yorker’s graphic legacy is as significant as its journalistic counterpart**





*"My God, we're out of gin!"*

drew them up, mailed them back and were paid. The result was completely wooden art. The artists' attitude toward a joke was exactly that of a short story illustrator's toward a short story. They illustrated the joke and got their money for the drawing. Now this practice led to all humorous drawings being "illustrations." It also resulted in their being wooden, run of the mill products. The artists never thought for themselves and never learned to think. They weren't humorous artists; they were dull-witted illustrators. A humorous artist is a creative person, an illustrator isn't.

Much of the credit for this revolution in attitude goes to Rea Irvin, the magazine's first de facto art editor. Large and good living, eleven years older than Ross, he was a worldly and charismatic figure. A one-time actor and member of the Players, the private theatrical and literary club on Gramercy Park, Irvin wore a fedora with a brim so wide that it resembled a ten-gallon hat. At his affluent peak, he stocked his home in Newtown, Connecticut, with an assortment of animals, including some horses that he called his "models." But behind his genial eccentricities lay the sure eye of a former art editor of Life.

In The New Yorker's early, parlous days, Irvin provided necessary graphic gravitas. It was he who drew Eustace Tilley for the cover of the very first issue, modeling him on a caricature of the Count D'Orsay striking a pose with a walking stick. The caricature dated from the December 1834 issue of Fraser's Magazine and was hardly representative of the smart, jazzy image that Ross wanted to project for his new magazine. But by adding the touch of having the fop look disinterestedly through a monocle at a butterfly, Irvin conveyed the essence of The New Yorker—a slightly condescending but consummately tasteful arbiter of the larger world.

"At the very beginning, of course, Ross was fussing with the format of the magazine and here Rea Irvin was endlessly helpful. He drew all the small department headings and the big ones," recalled Katharine White. "Rea was especially good on covers and on color, and was himself one of the great cover artists. The Eustace Tilley anniversary cover is one of the least beautiful of those that he did. He had studied Chinese art and many of his covers had a kind of Chinese look to them."

Thurber agreed. "The invaluable Irvin, artist, ex-actor, wit, and sophisticate about town and country, did more to develop the style and excellence of New Yorker drawings and covers than anyone else, and was the main and shining reason that the magazine's comic art in the first two years was far superior to its humorous prose," he said.

The process gelled in The New Yorker's art meetings that took place at two p.m. on Tuesday, the only day of the week that Irvin, who had other irons in his various fires, would actually appear in the office. In the beginning, the routine was simple: "Wylie would hold up the drawings and covers, and Irvin would explain to Ross what was good about them, or wrong, or old, or promising."

But as The New Yorker caught on, and Ross began bringing to these meetings the same eagle eye he brought to bear on the magazine's written material, things became more complicated, with the proceedings dragging on for three hours or more. Hundreds of specimens had to be examined, discussed, criticized, accepted, and rejected. Ross would pounce at faulty draftsmanship, missing details, insufficient clarity, and other shortcomings, literally pointing out the problems with a knitting needle and asking, "Where am I in this picture?" "Who's talking?" and even "Is it funny?" Frequently he didn't get that far. When he would snort, as he often did, "Goddam awful," "Get it out of here!" or "Cut your throat!" that would be the signal for whoever was displaying the art to quickly bring up the next specimen.

Always he was consumed with believability. Once, after scrutinizing for two minutes a possible cover of a Model T wending its way along a dusty back road, he insisted that the artist draw "better dust." During World

War II he was so concerned about the details of the torpedo tubes in a drawing of a PT boat that he insisted that the manufacturers approve of the rendering.

His attention to detail extended across issues. Upon being informed that from 1936 to 1947 the magazine had published 20 cartoons on the theme of counting sheep—including five in 1947 alone—Ross wrote to copy chief Hobart Weekes, "Drawings of sheep jumping fences are not to be run oftener than once in six months. (We had two in successive issues recently, which was certainly very bad.)" ■



**"Cast of Characters: Wolcott Gibbs, E.B. White, James Thurber, and the Golden Age of The New Yorker"**  
By Thomas Vinciguerra  
W.W. Norton

## 1962

**John Hughes** retired in September from Brigham Young University, where he was a professor of international communications. In 1967, during his tenure as a foreign correspondent for The Christian Science Monitor, he received a Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting.

## 1984

**Nina Bernstein** won a Front Page Award for feature writing, from the Newswomen's Club of New York. Bernstein, a reporter for The New York Times, was recognized for her story,

“Fighting to Honor a Father’s Last Wish: To Die at Home.”

## 1993

**Dori Maynard** was posthumously awarded the 2015 Rich Jaroslovsky Founder Award by the Online News Association for her work promoting diversity in the media. Maynard, who died in February, was the president of the Robert C. Maynard Institute for Journalism Education.

## 1998

**Howard Berkes** is a recipient of the Online News

Association’s Al Neuharth Innovation in Investigative Journalism Award. A correspondent for NPR, Berkes co-wrote “The Demolition of Workers’ Comp,” a story that was part of the award-winning “Insult to Injury,” a series, produced by ProPublica and NPR, about the country’s vanishing worker protections.

**Julia Keller’s** “Last Ragged Breath,” the fourth in her Bell Elkins mystery series, was published by Minotaur.

## 2005

**Amy Ellis Nutt**, a Pulitzer-Prize winning science writer

at The Washington Post, is the author of “Becoming Nicole: The Transformation of an American Family,” published by Random House in October. Wayne and Kelly Maines adopted identical twin sons but by the time one of them was 4 he made it known that he identified as a female.

## 2008

**Dean Miller** is now senior vice president of content at the Connecticut Public Broadcasting Network (CPBN). Prior to joining CPBN, Miller was the director of the Center for News Literacy at Stony Brook University’s School of Journalism.

**Raúl Peñaranda** is a recipient of a 2015 Cabot Prize for outstanding reporting on Latin America and the Caribbean. An author, editor, analyst, and founder of three independent news outlets in Bolivia, Peñaranda was recognized for being “a voice of cool reason” in Bolivia’s polarized political environment. The Cabot prizes are administered by Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism.

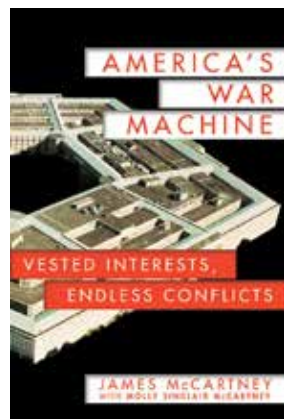
## 2009

**Margie Mason** is the recipient of a Barlett & Steele Award for Investigative Business Journalism, which is bestowed by the Donald W. Reynolds National Center for Business Journalism at Arizona State University. Mason and her Associated Press colleagues received the top award for their work on “Fish Slavery,” which exposed labor abuses by the Thai fishing industry. Hundreds of Burmese slaves were freed as a direct result of their reporting.

**Tommy Tomlinson** is featured in the 2015 anthology “The Best American Sports

## TAKING ON THE MILITARY-INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

*Molly Sinclair McCartney, NF '78, finished the book about America's national security policy and defense spending that her late husband, James McCartney, NF '64, started*



In January 1961, **James McCartney**, NF '64, covered President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s final White House speech in which he issued his now famous warning about the military-industrial complex.

A Washington-based reporter for the Chicago Daily News, James months later put together a five-part series on the military-industrial complex. In the years afterward, as the national security correspondent for the Knight Ridder (now McClatchy) newspapers, Jim continued to report on this issue and its impact on American foreign policy and defense spending.

After my own Nieman fellowship year ended in 1978, I spent three months traveling around the world before moving to D.C. to take a job with The Washington Post. I met Jim when I was living in D.C. and we married in 1984.

After he retired from daily journalism in 1990, he taught courses in foreign policy and politics at Georgetown University, wrote a regular newspaper column, and made speeches. It was his speeches questioning the 2003 invasion of Iraq that led some listeners to urge him to write a book explaining the vested interests that have led to endless conflicts in the years since World War II. He was working on that book when he died in May 2011.

At his memorial service in Florida the following month, a friend from the local library where Jim was a regular speaker asked what was going to happen to Jim’s book. I said I wasn’t sure. She urged me to finish it. In 2012 I worked on the book as a public policy scholar at the Wilson Center. With the help of colleagues, who provided important background information and encouragement, I completed the manuscript and found an agent who promptly sold it to St. Martin’s Press.

In October, “America’s War Machine: Vested Interests, Endless Conflicts”—with both of our names on the cover—was published. It raises questions about the billions of dollars the United States spends on national security, the use of our military in wars and interventions around the world over the past half-century, and the way the nation responds to terror threats.

It has been a long hard struggle, but worth all the sweat and all the tears.

## “SOMETIMES THE MIND BORROWS FROM THE HAND”

*How Joe Rodriguez, NF '98, talked himself into a Harvard sculpture class and ended up a better reporter*



Back in 1997 I was sailing through my interview when Nieman Foundation curator Bill Kovach body-slammed me with this question: “Mr. Rodriguez, how do I justify to the directors of the Harvard Corporation giving a Nieman fellowship to someone who wants to come to Harvard to make sculpture?”

Actually, sculpture was a secondary part of my study plan. In my application, I had written that the psychiatrist Carl Jung sculpted to overcome confusion and broaden his thinking. When I told Kovach, “Sometimes the mind borrows from the hand,” he smiled. (Some of you may know that Kovach is a pen and ink artist.)

I talked my way into a sculpture class at Harvard’s Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts with this pitch: Sculpture would help me become a better reporter.

I started badly with rather stunted, tabletop sculptures. One day I was presented with some 4-by-8-foot sheets of cardboard. Keep it simple and make it big, I thought, and look for a metaphor, not a political statement. Then it came to me—turn flat rectangles into a three-dimensional interpretation of dance and sound waves. I cut two curving lines down the length of the cardboard. I stood the panels up, turned one upside down, and glued the three pieces together to share a common spine. I named the 3-foot-high steel sculpture I welded “Contratiempo.” I eventually built a 450-pound version (above) that now stands in my backyard in San Jose, California.

Back at the San Jose Mercury News after my fellowship, I was given a new job—metro columnist—which I approached with fresh eyes and feeling for the growing city. The best example I can offer of the impact my sculpture class had on me is “San Jose on Foot,” a series of 17 opinion columns based on my walks with readers around our unwalkable city. City Hall kept building expensive palaces downtown, but what residents and workers really wanted was to get outside and enjoy the sunshine, playing fields, and parks. Their Internet connections had already rendered the traditional downtown irrelevant. Studying sculpture at Harvard inspired me to keep asking what ordinary people want and need from their city.

Writing,” which was published in October by Mariner. Tomlinson’s ESPN article “Precious Memories,” about the toll dementia has taken on former North Carolina basketball coach Dean Smith, is one of 21 pieces included in the anthology.

### 2010

**Sonali Samarasinghe** has been appointed minister counselor at Sri Lanka’s permanent mission to the United Nations in New York. She is overseeing committees addressing human rights, gender issues, and climate change. A lawyer and investigative journalist

covering human rights and freedom of the press, Samarasinghe worked with her late husband, editor in chief of Sri Lanka’s Sunday Leader Lasantha Wickrematunge, for more than a decade before fleeing the country shortly after he was killed.

### 2011

**Helen Branswell** has joined Stat, a new national life sciences publication from Boston Globe Media Partners, as a senior writer covering infectious diseases and public health. Previously, Branswell was a medical reporter for The Canadian Press, where she worked for about 30 years.

### 2012

**Raquel Rutledge** is a member of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel team that received the University of Florida Award in Investigative Data Journalism at the annual conference of the Online News Association. Their story, “Trouble with Taxes,” explores the uneven property assessments across Wisconsin.

### 2013

**Chong-ae Lee** is now overseeing the Seoul Broadcasting System’s Future and Vision Division desk and is the team leader for the Seoul Digital Forum.

**Finbarr O’Reilly** has been named a 2015 Yale World Fellow as part of the university’s four-month global leadership development initiative. O’Reilly, an author and photojournalist, is one of 16 fellows.

### 2014

**Sandra Rodríguez Nieto** is the author of a new book, “The Story of Vicente, Who Murdered His Mother, His Father, and His Sister: Life and Death in Juarez,” which was published by Verso in November. The book, translated from Spanish into English, reconstructs in a Capote-like manner a triple murder in Mexico.

### 2015

**Johanna van Eeden** became editor in chief of Media24, which controls the newspaper and magazine publishing of South African media company Naspers, in September.

**Farnaz Fassihi**, a reporter for The Wall Street Journal, is the recipient of a 2015 Front Page Award presented to female journalists by the Newswomen’s Club of New York. Fassihi received the Marie Colvin Award for Foreign Correspondence.

**Melody Kramer**, a 2015 Nieman Knight Visiting Fellow, is among the 22 recipients of a Knight Foundation \$35,000 Prototype Fund grant. Kramer, a former digital strategist for NPR, is examining ways to broaden the meaning of public media membership.

**Celeste LeCompte** is now ProPublica’s director of business development, a new position. Based in New York, she reports to president Richard Tofel.

## Shepherding The Message Telling small stories with big impacts

**W**HEN I STARTED OUT in network news, I was all about the big lead story. There's a sense in most newsrooms that those are the ones that are the most important, the most meaningful.

I'm not a political junkie, but I've covered the primaries and conventions in each of the election cycles I've worked as a producer for ABC and NBC News. I've produced interviews with Barack Obama and his opponents and with presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. I went to Haiti to cover the 2010 earthquake, to Egypt to cover the revolution, and to Canada's Oil Sands to cover the story behind the Keystone XL pipeline controversy. My job has taken me to Madagascar and the Galápagos Islands.

I loved those assignments, but I've come to realize I love the small stories more, stories like Hunter Gandee's. My on-air colleague Kate Snow and I met Hunter last year, when the middle-school wrestler decided to carry his brother Braden on his back from their home near Toledo to the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, 40 miles away. Braden has cerebral palsy, and Hunter wanted to raise awareness about the disorder. It took them two days, and the walk was tough at times, especially when Braden's legs started chafing in the sling his physical therapist had gotten him to try to help keep him comfortable. But the boys made it, supported by friends and family—and taught us all a lesson in strength and resilience.

We also met Denise, a mom in Missouri, whose sons—both heroin addicts—lived with her. She kept a vial of Narcan by her bed, a drug that can reverse an opioid over-

dose, even though it was illegal for her to have it. She's sent her sons to rehab and tried to help as best she can. Yet her older son, Ryan, was still using when we met him. He showed up high at one of our shoots, slumping in his seat, his eyes glazing over, and we understood why she was so afraid.

"Your kids are everything to you," she told us through tears, "and my goal every day is to keep them alive. And so far I've succeeded."

We made multiple trips to Moore, Oklahoma, a town that had twice been ripped apart by tornadoes. The last time, our story focused on Plaza Towers Elementary, the school where seven children had died. We examined the impact an F5 tornado had on the community a year after it hit.

We don't usually get a lot of time on the evening news: the Plaza Towers story was two and a half minutes long and 368 words—that's including the quotes. We managed to fit in sound from the school's principal, two teachers, the family of a surviving student, and the parents of a victim.

They all had a part in the story, but on the day the piece aired, we were told the show was tight on time and asked to make cuts. I said no.

The thing I realized then was: This wasn't our story. We walked into their town,

saw the pain they were going through, and tried to claim it. There's a real temptation to think that we own the stories we tell; that we see the bigger picture as journalists; that we write the endings. But in reality, we're just connecting dots. And just as we have an obligation to report out the facts of a story, I believe we have a responsibility to be true to our subjects and represent them fairly.

That was never clearer to me than on the last big story I worked on before leaving NBC to start my Nieman fellowship.

Five-year-old Jacob Lemay is like all the other kids in his class—gregarious, fun-loving, and well-spoken. But Jacob is transgender. His parents, Mimi and Joe, let us into their home, introduced us to Jacob and his sisters, and helped us get access to his school so that we could see Jacob interact with other children.

"Nightly News" and "Today" each gave us nearly five minutes for the story. The version we posted online reached 35 million people on Facebook—16 million video views, 200,000 likes and shares, 20,000 comments. These are the kind of numbers many of us hate to think about as journalists, but they are a testament to the enduring interest in strong, character-driven, narrative features.

During our interview, we asked Jacob's parents why they'd decided to share their story so publicly. "If I speak up now and my voice joins the voices of other people who are telling their stories," said Mimi, "then maybe this can change. But if I stay private and quiet as I am tempted to do, by my natural instinct to protect, then how can I expect the world to change for Jacob?"

And in many ways, I think that's why I do what I do now. I believe that there are people out there who are doing incredible things to make a difference in the world. And if I can help shepherd their message—give a platform to their voices, bring light to what they are doing—then I think that's the best contribution that I can make. ■

### Wonbo Woo



**Journalists might be tempted to think that we own the stories we tell, but in reality we don't**

*Wonbo Woo, a 2016 Nieman Fellow, is a veteran television news producer*



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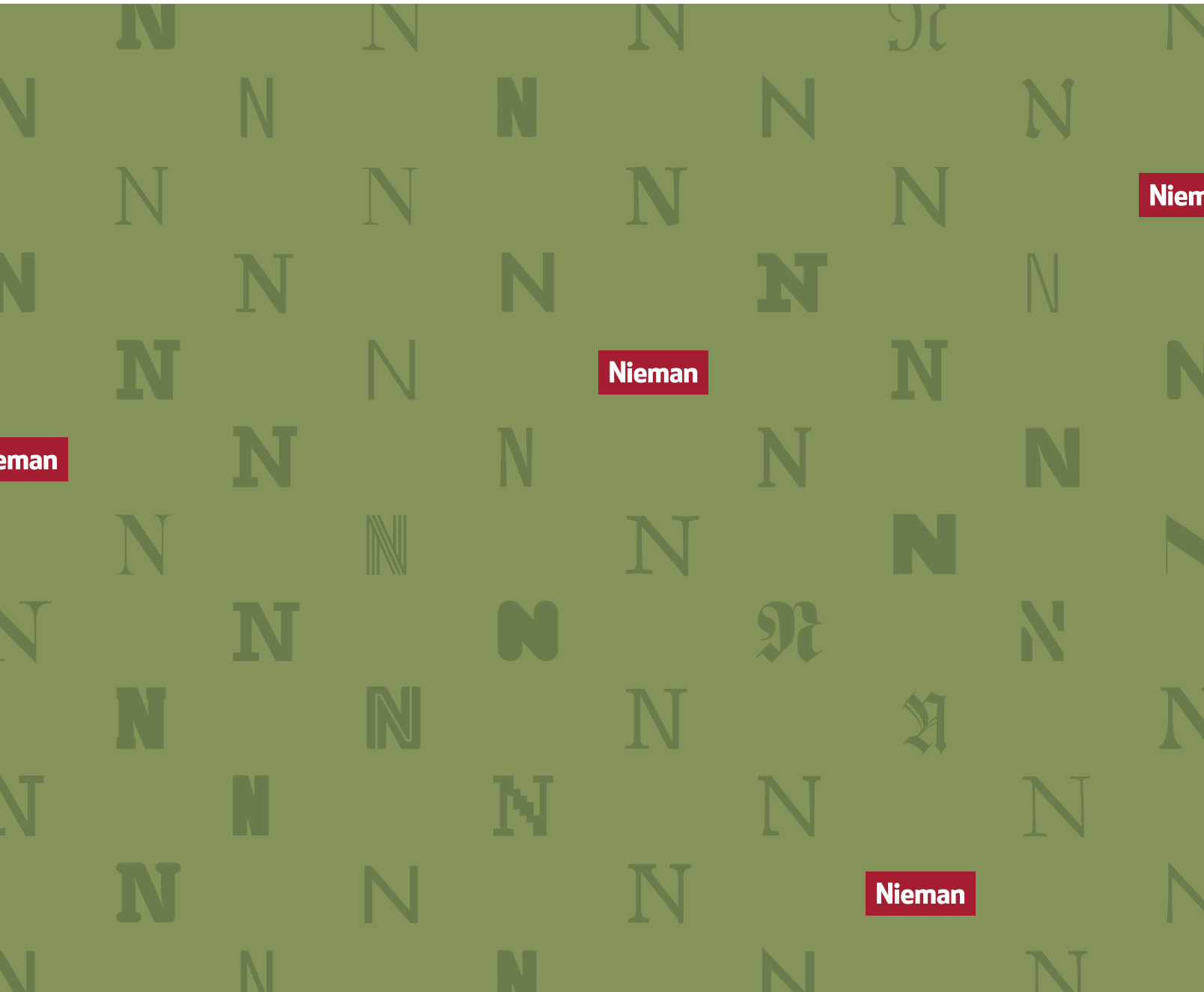
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