

NIEMAN REPORTS

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FALL**



**HOW POLITICAL  
COVERAGE IS  
CHANGING TO  
GET BEYOND  
POLARIZATION AND  
PARTISANSHIP**



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Advocates for and against abortion demonstrate outside the Supreme Court after a leak of a draft majority opinion overturning *Roe v. Wade*

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## Rukhshana Media: “Do Not Forget Afghanistan”

**Zahra Joya**, founder and editor of Rukhshana Media, spoke with the Nieman Foundation after being honored with the Louis M. Lyons Award for Conscience and Integrity in Journalism

In April, Nieman Fellows from the class of 2022 honored Rukhshana Media, an online news outlet in Afghanistan, with the Louis M. Lyons Award for Conscience and Integrity in Journalism. Founded by Zahra Joya in 2020, Rukhshana Media centers the experiences of women throughout Afghanistan, reporting on “the difficulty of gaining inclusion in a society [where] religious conservatism and patriarchy have ruled all aspects of social life.” Through a team of mostly female reporters, Rukhshana publishes stories on a number of women’s issues, including child marriage, gender violence, economic hardship, and street harassment. The work of reporting on gender inequality in Afghanistan has become even more important since the Taliban seized power last August, placing women in the country under threat.

Joya spoke with the Nieman Foundation in May about Afghanistan’s media landscape for women journalists, the work and founding of Rukhshana Media, finding hope, and more. Edited excerpts:

### On the work of Rukhshana Media

I’m truly honored that our media organization, Rukhshana Media, received a prestigious award from [the] Nieman Foundation at Harvard University. This award encouraged and motivated my team to work very hard for free media and free speech. Thank you so much. It is my honor to be talking to you on behalf of my colleagues at Rukhshana Media.

It is very hard to tell you that, unfortunately, right now, more than 500 media outlets stopped operating since Taliban took power eight months ago. Hundreds of journalists, male and female, lost their jobs. Hundreds of media workers, including myself, fled Afghanistan. Today, my colleagues at Rukhshana Media and as well as my journalist friends at other

outlets in Afghanistan, they are working in extremely difficult situations. I never imagined then that one day I [would be] running Rukhshana Media in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.

It is a difficult time for all of us. Honestly, when I received the award from [the] Nieman Foundation, I was very proud. It shows solidarity from you, and it is helpful for all media and journalists in Afghanistan.

Please do not forget Afghanistan and my country that needs to help and support the media journalist.

Rukhshana Media is a women-led news organization established in November 2020 to cover women’s issues in Afghanistan. Rukhshana Media has been named after a young woman, Rukhshana, who was stoned to death by the Taliban in 2015.

Rukhshana Media tells the story of women from across Afghanistan, from how they’re treated at home [to] their role and position in society. We are publishing in two languages, Persian and English, covering Afghan women’s issues inside and outside of Afghanistan.

### On Afghanistan’s media landscape for women journalists

We at Rukhshana Media tell the story of the love, success, and failure of Afghan women from across the country every day. At Rukhshana Media, we tell the stories of the women and girls who are living under a regime of gender apartheid in the 21st century at a time when women can’t even choose their own clothes.

At Rukhshana Media, we want to tell what it means to lose not only your rights, your job, but also your social identity. We do not simply do journalism these days: We are also covering the laws of our own rights, of our own freedoms. It is hard and painful.

One day, we write about girls being deprived [of] going to school. The next

day, about women being banned from sport activities. We report [on] forced marriage, mysterious killings, and the list goes on.

Women journalists are particularly at risk. They are disappearing from Afghan media landscape simply because they are women. I am speaking to you here today as a woman journalist. Although it has never been easy to be a woman and a journalist in Afghanistan, it is now much more difficult to be even an author and a woman in Afghanistan.

Being a journalist is a far-reaching wish. There are very few female journalists remaining in the country. Taliban have forced them to wear hijab, ban them from appearing on film, and raising their voice on radio from some provinces.

In our small newsroom, we usually listen to women who are telling their horrible stories while crying. When they talked about their lost dreams, they burst into tears.

### On becoming a journalist and starting Rukhshana

When I was a child, my father was a prosecutor. Some of the women, they came to our house and asked my father to help them. At that time, I decided to become a lawyer and become a prosecutor like my father and help women.

In 2011 when I started my university lessons, one of my friends was working with one local news agency. She invited me to go with her to her office and see her colleagues. After that, she asked me, “If you want to work with us ... let’s start.”

[At] that time, there were a lot of the stories from my classmates. They wanted to share, but there wasn’t any platform. I walked the first steps working as a journalist. For three months I just learned. I just wanted to know: How should I interview with people? What [are] the main questions? What is necessary for a journalist?

After that, I started to work. In 2020, I decided to establish Rukhshana with a simple goal: to create a common conversation among Afghan women. Unfortunately, in Afghanistan, the women, they don’t have enough time to talk together and to write about their lives or read about some things.

I asked my friends and female journalists, “I want to create an organization — for example, Rukhshana — do you want to join with me?” They said yes, we will help you [with] the details



Rukhshana Media, founded by Zahra Joya, centers the experiences of women in Afghanistan, an important task after the Taliban seized power

and for materials that we will publish for reporting. We started.

At first, our goal was very simple. All our team was female. Unfortunately, after the Taliban came, everything has changed.

### On leaving Afghanistan after the fall of Kabul

I want to say that on 15th of August of last year, we [did] not lose only our government. We lost the result of our 20 years of our life. It is never easy.

I left Afghanistan on the 26th of August. I was very heartbroken. It was like a very bad dream. When I came to the airport and I saw there [were] many families, children, old people who are trying to get out from Afghanistan, it was very hard for me.

When I left Afghanistan, we came with an army plane. I tried to look to Kabul for the last time. Unfortunately, there [weren’t] windows, and I can’t say good-bye to Kabul. I didn’t see the last moment, my beautiful city.

It was very difficult and hard for me, and heartbreaking too. I never imagined in my life one day I should flee my country.

### On how international media can support Afghanistan

Our journalists need financial support. Some of them who are living in high risk, they need to get out [of] Afghanistan.

Unfortunately, sometimes we can’t find any way to solve this problem.

After the Ukraine crisis, all of the media and foreign journalists [forgot] Afghanistan. Right now, situations in my country [are getting] worse.

When one group [comes] and takes all of your rights, for example, you can’t speak, you can’t talk, and even you can’t choose your own clothes. I hope international journalists do not forget Afghanistan.

Unfortunately, when the U.S. and foreign soldiers withdrew from Afghanistan, the Western media, especially the U.S., they didn’t have enough stories from Afghanistan. But Afghanistan is full of stories. Right now, all of the media, they are focusing on the Ukraine crisis. In my country, they [are] repeatedly ask[ing] the media and journalists to please share our voice to your countries.

### On training young journalists for the future

Unfortunately, since August, hundreds of journalists who had a very good experience left Afghanistan. Now, we are facing these problems, and we can’t find a journalist who has experience.

In our newsroom at Rukhshana, we work with this young generation of journalists very closely. We want to teach them how you should follow our way, and how you work

as a journalist in this time and this moment. Right now, unfortunately in Afghanistan, there is no way to, for example, hold workshops for journalists or fellowships.

Now, some of the journalism students — we published a story about them — they say, “[There] is no way we study journalism because we can’t work as a journalist now. We don’t have a platform now.” Unfortunately, the curriculum of the universities, it is become changed from the Taliban.

### On finding hope in reporting on Afghanistan

All of these stories we are publishing, it’s sad. Honestly, I’m not excited for these stories, because in our team meetings, I ask my colleagues, “Please find a very positive story, an energetic story.” They say, “It is not the time that we publish a positive and exciting story.”

When I’ve been in touch with women, they are still hoping for their future, and still they’re protesting against the Taliban. It gives me hope. It’s a very small candle in the darkness. For me, when I see the women who are aware about their lives, and who are asking the Taliban to come and discuss with them, it is very helpful and positive. Still, I’m hoping for the future of Afghanistan. ■





Dredging barges operated by illegal miners converge on the Madeira river, a tributary of the Amazon river, searching for gold, in Autazes, Amazonas state, Brazil

## A “Fresh Start” Covering the Amazon

Fabiano Maisonave, NF ’16, on the importance of reporting on the rainforest’s destruction

I was about to attend a welcome meeting in a remote Arara tribe village when the call miraculously came in through the unreliable internet antennae. The connection lasted long enough for Peter Prengaman, climate and environmental editor for The Associated Press, to tell me I was selected to be the agency’s correspondent to the Amazon basin.

The next day, as photographer Lalo de Almeida and I continued our boat trip through the magnificent yet unknown Iriri River, the world’s largest rainforest seemed to ask: Which of my endless stories should you reveal to a much larger audience? Are you ready for a fresh start, to see me with new eyes?

In more than two decades as a reporter with Brazil’s newspaper Folha de S.Paulo, I have had the privilege to report from many fascinating and complex places, including living in Washington, D.C., Beijing, and Caracas. But none of them mesmerized me more than the Amazon.

So, in 2016, when I came back to Brazil from my Nieman fellowship, I asked my editors to go straight to

## Building a Better Future for Our Information Spaces

Stefanie Friedhoff, NF ’01, has launched a new initiative to help address information gaps

Technology has fundamentally changed where people seek information and what they believe. It’s why, no matter how often officials revert to it, communicating by press conference and media interviews alone is no longer sufficient to quickly inform diverse audiences in a crisis and build trust.

Working with public health experts during this pandemic, I realized how easy it is for those of us who have been in

Manaus and reopen the newspaper bureau in the Amazon, which had been closed the year before. Despite the high costs and budget restraints, they said yes.

Journalism is born of friction. In the Amazon, it focuses on the ongoing destruction of its mysterious beauty. More often than not, I feel like I have been covering a prolonged 16th century: My stories have dealt with illegal invasions of Indigenous territories, a gold rush, logging, and forest conversion to pasture through fire.

Instead of improving, all these colonial-era practices got worse after 2019, when far-right President Jair Bolsonaro took office and weakened Brazil’s environmental law enforcement and Indigenous rights, all in the name of economic development.

Many who live in the forest, along with scientists and policy makers worldwide, believe the planet can’t afford to lose its most biodiverse forest, invaluable Indigenous knowledge, and crucial carbon sink. Tribes that have lived in the forest for centuries are on the frontlines of resisting development pressures, from cutting to mining, and fighting for land rights and sustainable practices.

The Amazon is of global concern because life would be much worse without it. That’s the story I want to keep telling, and there’s nowhere better as part of AP’s new climate team, spreading around the world. ■

journalism for a long time to overestimate what people understand about how our changed information ecosystem shapes the conversation around important issues. While fake news and alternative facts have seeped into the public consciousness, people know less about how underlying design and policy choices allow age-old phenomena like rumors and lies to dominate. This created significant inequities in who has access to accurate, evidence-based information.

## The Justice Beat Goes Into “Overdrive”

Carrie Johnson, NF ’20, on covering the FBI search of former President Donald Trump’s home

The key to the justice beat is easy to understand and difficult to execute. Running with the pack on breaking news is essential. But reporters truly distinguish themselves by doing enterprise stories they squeeze in during the rare quiet stretches.

The challenge was especially acute during the unprecedented FBI search of former President Donald Trump’s Florida home — the kind of week where a plot to kill the former U.S. national security adviser gets one minute of coverage.

Reporting on the Justice Department can be a hectic and unpredictable enterprise. Covering the FBI search of Mar-a-Lago meant it was time to dump out the toolbox and deploy every tool. That started with calls to national security experts, criminal defense lawyers, and figures in the Trump orbit. Next came electronic searches of the court docket in south Florida and trips to Justice Department headquarters to prowl the hallways.

NPR’s flagship shows, Morning Edition

That’s why Claire Wardle, founder of First Draft News, and I started the Information Futures Lab (IFL) at the Brown University School of Public Health.

At its core, the Lab is built for individuals and organizations who help people access the information and knowledge they need to live healthy, socially connected lives. From journalists who contextualize news to community organizations that translate issues like changes in abortion rights to public health officials to librarians to educators — the lab equips them with resources, skills, and a network.

How do we do this? By creating rapid learning cycles connecting researchers, practitioners, and policymakers. Our



Attorney Deanna Shullman, who represents the Wall Street Journal, discusses the case to make public the affidavit supporting the search warrant on Mar-a-Lago

and All Things Considered, wanted regular updates, from 5 a.m. to 5 p.m. Podcasts — including Up First and the Politics Podcast — asked for more context, in a more conversational tone. Our stories explained the high bar it took for the FBI to convince a judge to approve a search warrant, the laws that prosecutors say might have been broken, and why the public was not likely to see much of the underlying affidavit describing the Justice Department’s sources and methods.

In between breaking news coverage, the network aired a story I reported about an innovative education program for people in jail. Email and phone traffic from others

involved in the criminal justice system poured in, so I gathered leads to pursue whenever the flood of news ends.

At its best, radio transports listeners into new experiences, making powerful connections between the people featured in stories and the audience members in their homes, their cars, or their offices.

In my free time, I choose to bring those listeners the voices they’re unlikely to hear elsewhere: the stories of incarcerated people, their families, and their advocates. They’re speaking to their fellow Americans and to policymakers about the ways the system fails them, and why that should matter to all of us. ■

“  
While fake news and alternative facts have seeped into the public consciousness, people know less about how underlying design and policy choices allow age-old phenomena like rumors and lies to dominate

team translates into plain language key findings from siloed research fields such as misinformation, behavioral sciences, and the digital humanities. A literature review will launch this fall.

We work directly with practitioners, for example, on evaluating and capturing new ways to build health literacy and misinformation resilience in communities of color hit hard by the pandemic.

We run design sprints, a fellowship program, and a global Community of Infodemics Managers to push for ideation and testing of practices for our new information realities.

We think that collectively, we can find out what works long-term to create information spaces that by and large benefit democracy, not threaten it. ■

LEFT: EDMAR BARROS/AP PHOTO; RIGHT: LYNNE SLADKY/AP PHOTO





**“I ALWAYS  
JUST GO  
BACK TO  
BEING A  
HUMAN  
FIRST”**

**Trauma-informed reporting can help journalists better connect with sources dealing with grief, pain, and loss**

**BY JULIA CRAVEN**





**“WE NEED TO BE TRAINED IN TRAUMA AWARENESS. WE NEED TO BE TRAINED IN SKILLS FOR GOOD PRACTICE FOR WORKING WITH PEOPLE WHO ARE REALLY HURTING, WHOSE STORIES ARE SO PAINFUL THEY’RE MAKING THE NEWS”**

**MAYA RAO, MINNEAPOLIS STAR TRIBUNE**

In an industry that prioritizes objectivity and distance from the issues we cover, it may seem counterintuitive for journalists to take the mental health of their sources into account. But over the last few years, as the pandemic and the fight for racial justice forced newsrooms to reevaluate which voices are elevated, the toll the process of being included in a story can take on vulnerable people is coming more into focus.

From interviewing a family member of a crime victim to framing the plight of a migrant seeking asylum to writing about a person experiencing addiction to selecting a photograph of a sexual assault survivor, reporters and photographers across various beats have begun employing the same tactics that mental health journalists have used throughout their careers, taking care to center the perspective of their sources, stay clear of tropes, and recognize a wide range of traumas. As news organizations attempt to embrace new audiences — and highlight communities that are often at the margins — it’s imperative that we come to terms with how taxing it can be to interact with reporters and the fact that our work has a profound influence on the public’s understanding of trauma.

Trauma-informed reporting recognizes what the person being interviewed has experienced, how it could be affecting them currently, and how the interview process could burden them further. But it also doesn’t reduce anyone to their trauma. At its best, trauma-informed reporting acknowledges what happened and seeks to understand how the individual is moving forward. “It’s important that reporters speak to their interviewee and see a person there, not just a source of information. By humanizing, rather than objectifying, the people reporters talk to, they are more likely to build rapport and gain

trust,” says Melissa Stanger, a social worker, psychotherapist, and former journalist. “It’s important that reporters not glamorize or sensationalize a traumatic event for a story, as it could reflect poorly on reporters and be seen as exploitative.”

**O**n **May 26, 2021**, Naomi Osaka, one of the most high-profile tennis players in the world, announced that she would not be attending press conferences at the French Open. The cause, she said on social media, was how journalists covering the sport treated the mental health of the players.

“I’ve often felt that people have no regard for athletes’ mental health and this rings true whenever I see a press conference or partake in one,” wrote Osaka. “We’re often sat there and asked questions that we’ve been asked multiple times before or asked questions that bring doubt into our minds and I’m just not going to subject myself to people that doubt me.”

Despite an overwhelming number of supporters, many in the tennis world — and several sports journalists — wrote Osaka off as unprofessional. The context of Osaka’s decision is important, though. After she skyrocketed into mainstream fame following her win against Serena

**I**n **April 2020**, as the pandemic was raging across the United States, Ed Yong noticed that many people he interviewed felt exhausted. They worked in pandemic preparedness or emergency response before the virus was officially found in the United States. For them, the coronavirus had been a big deal for months, and they openly spoke to him about being mentally worn out.

A few weeks later, toward the end of May, Yong, a staff writer at The Atlantic, started to consider how the mental health of his sources intersected with his responsibilities as a journalist. He’d begun interviewing people who tested positive for Covid-19 — some requiring hospitalization — and had persistent symptoms even weeks later, a group that would become known as long haulers. Yong didn’t know how an interview would affect them and asking someone to relive a challenging experience that they may see as the worst experience of their lives can be hard on the person retelling their story.

“One of the most common things that you hear when you talk to long haulers is that they are beyond fatigued, that they have a lack of energy so absolute that doing normal physical things is really hard,” Yong says. That fatigue can be cognitive, and many long haulers experience severe brain fog. “Even just reading a book can trigger these intense physiological crashes. Several things struck me in interviewing these folks. It costs them to do an interview. It’s not the same as me talking to you now.”

PREVIOUS SPREAD: ANATOLY CHERKASOV/INURPHOTO; CARLOS GONZALEZ/STAR TRIBUNE. BOTH VIA GETTY IMAGES

**PREVIOUS SPREAD:** During the 2021 French Open, tennis player Naomi Osaka announced she would not attend press conferences, citing mental health concerns

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** Star Tribune reporter Maya Rao interviewed George Floyd’s loved ones, including his partner Courteney Ross, in a piece that aimed to center his humanity





**Ashley Yates, a Black Lives Matter organizer, became an activist after the police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson. Since the Black Lives Matter movement regained prominence in 2020, journalists have reported on the mental health toll activism can take**

Williams at the 2018 U.S. Open, the world was watching her — a young, introverted, soft-spoken Black woman whose demeanor clashes with the collective imagination of who an athlete should be.

Dealing with mental health issues and setting boundaries to protect oneself contradicts the idea that athletes are strong — since anxiety and depression are often seen as signs of weakness — and the public’s perceived right of access to them. The boundaries set by Osaka don’t align with how the public sees “strong” Black women either, who are expected to show up despite how we may be feeling in professional settings. But instead of powering through post-match interviews, Osaka chose to be publicly vulnerable, contradicting the expectations placed on Black women and riling up backlash. By speaking out despite the stigma, Osaka invigorated the public discourse around how journalists should handle the subject.

Osaka’s boundaries here also help illustrate a perception of journalists that saturates pop culture. They’re hard-nosed, dogged reporters who are hyper-antagonistic to those in power and a bit overzealous in their approach. That impression, while often an outdated exaggeration as more reporters are practicing trauma-informed reporting, isn’t entirely unfounded. Many of us are accustomed to interviewing politicians or others in positions of power who should be asked tough questions, held accountable for their actions, and kept at arm’s length.

But that approach isn’t applicable to everyone we interview — especially those who are dealing with a significant mental health issue or who have experienced

trauma. Despite Covid-19 and the Black Lives Matter movement giving it more prominence, this sensitivity has been missing during events that are viewed as being more political than human-centric.

This trauma is familiar to Black people in America, though the feelings of grief that follow such indignities aren’t always recognized as such. But the backlash to this disregard for the mental health of those protesting has uplifted the need for more tactful coverage across beats. Being considerate of the community you’re covering or someone you’re interviewing does not conflict with our duties as journalists.

“One of our most sacred responsibilities as journalists is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Everyone talks about that. If you take that to heart, then often you’re going to be interviewing people who are very vulnerable, who have been ignored, neglected, and marginalized,” says Yong. “All of that can strip them of agency and a feeling of control in their lives. It isn’t necessarily my job to restore that — although, arguably, that is part of comforting the afflicted — but I can do that. And I can do that in pretty simple ways that cost me nothing. And that doesn’t violate any of the tenets of our job.”

There are a handful of guides designed to help reporters sort through the right kind of language to use while on deadline. U.K.-based charity Disaster Action worked with numerous families who experienced roughly 30 natural and human-created disasters. Using the feedback from these families, the organization distilled what made working with journalists a positive en-

counter into six key factors: honesty, acknowledgment, accuracy, consent, control, and compassion.

According to the Disaster Action guidelines, transparency is crucial when journalists initially approach a potential source. Best practices include clearly explaining the type of questions you may ask, how you’re thinking about the broader story structure, and being clear about your interest in learning about the interviewee’s experience. It’s equally meaningful to acknowledge that a source is dealing with something difficult, but journalists should avoid saying they “know” what someone is going through, says Jo Healey, author of “Trauma Reporting: A Journalist’s Guide to Covering Sensitive Stories,” and Elana Newman, research director of the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, an organization that develops best practices for trauma reporting.

Based on her research, Healey says it could be particularly inappropriate to say something like this to parents grieving the loss of a child. Instead, she and Newman advise saying, “I’m sorry that happened to you.”

Precision and informed consent are essential pillars of the HAACCC method, too. It’s crucial to ensure those interviewed understand the reporting process — even the potentially off-putting aspects. For example, a reporter can explain why getting a comment from the police department is necessary when speaking to a survivor of police violence or their family. It’s also good practice to avoid being overly interrogative or assuming someone is being shifty when they can’t provide a straightforward response to a question.

Yong advises keeping the interview scope focused on what is necessary for the story. And when someone is hesitant to speak, shifting the conversation to how important it is for the world to hear what they have to say could be detrimental to the interviewee, adds Stanger, the social worker and psychotherapist.

The Dart Center also offers a wide range of evidence-backed guidance — including a style guide — to help reporters make decisions about what information to include in a story and what language to use. The guide recommends staying away from euphemisms like “urban” when describing a geographic area because that can promote a racist framing. In the context of a war or international conflict, euphemisms can obscure “the responsibility of key actors.” It also recommends staying away from the terms “alleged” or “claimed” during interviews with someone who has been sexually assaulted because it might make them feel that they aren’t believed. The more details the better, advises the guide, because that helps create a fuller picture of the people and circumstances on which you are reporting.

Maya Rao, a reporter covering race and immigration at the Minneapolis Star Tribune, does this in her piece, “George Floyd’s Search for Salvation.” Rao’s prose paints the contours of Floyd’s humanity and the extent to which racism shaped his life and death — relying on extensive interviews with people who knew the man personally and including such details as how he grew up in poverty, drying his socks in the oven.

“Even though you’re a reporter programmed to deliver ... on a deadline, never ever lose sight of your hu-

manity when you’re covering these sorts of stories,” says Healey. “We need to be trained in trauma awareness. We need to be trained in skills for good practice for working with people who are really hurting, whose stories are so painful they’re making the news.”

**W**ithin many cultures, mental health disorders are highly stigmatized. Cultural identity isn’t a risk marker for experiencing mental illness, but navigating a mental health disorder can be especially difficult when identities intersect.

For example, Black women are more likely to live with depression and chronic anxiety but less likely to receive treatment — a vastly underreported topic. In a piece for the The New York Times, John Eligon explores the soul-cracking work of Black activism and its effects on mental health. Migrants and asylum seekers, as explored in Univision’s reporting on the trauma endured by people seeking asylum in the U.S., have a high incidence rate of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, too. Vox writer Aja Romano points out that LGBTQ+ folks are more likely to experience mental health disorders and various forms of violence, and writes about the implications of Florida’s “don’t say gay” bill, including doxing queer people who are accused of “grooming” children — a deeply homophobic and transphobic trope meant to malign queer people.

What these stories have in common is a rejection of stereotypes and a focus on the humanity of the people being reported on. “We’re all exposed to a lot of inac-

**“THEY SAW SOMEBODY WHO LOOKED LIKE THEM, WHO WAS JUST TRYING TO UNDERSTAND THEM”**

**TYLER TYNES, GQ MAGAZINE**

curate information and a lot of stereotypes about mental health. And [there are] a lot of stigmas composed of stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination,” says Monica Calkins, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. “Much of that exposure does come through the media.”

Calkins advises journalists to be aware of these stereotypes. During interviews, Calkins suggests acknowledging that mental illness may be difficult to talk about and making sure to be sensitive to that reality. Perpetuating ideas like mental illness is associated with evil or the result of a moral failing often prevents people from seeking help or talking about their experiences. Avoiding making certain connections — such as saying someone who died by suicide was experiencing depression without proof from their medical provider, associating schizophrenia with violence, or trivializing obsessive-compulsive disorder — is also key. Calkins adds that it’s important to remember that parents aren’t to blame for a child’s mental health disorder, too.

A Los Angeles Times piece on mental health services

CHRISTIE HEMM KLOK/THE NEW YORK TIMES



in South L.A. highlights the cultural stigma that complicates navigating depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation — as well as accessing treatment — for Black and Latino people. Sergio Nuño, one person interviewed in the piece, shared that his parents weren't quite sure how to help him. The only mental health providers they'd ever seen were on TV, and in Jalisco, where they're from, going to therapy meant you were "crazy." Courtney, another interviewee, shared how she almost didn't attend therapy because she was afraid people would find out she was engaging in something that was "for white people."

Reporter Joe Mozingo found Courtney and Nuño through his contacts at Martin Luther King Jr. Community Hospital. "The only way I could see [for] finding the right people was to go through someone who was already doing good work in that field, was trusted by the community, and who understood the mission of journalism and getting the word out," Mozingo says.

By interviewing the psychiatrist who worked with both Nuño and Courtney, Mozingo makes clear that,

way about it. Such questions, explains the Dart Center's Newman, can sound like blaming to the interviewee. The best way to report on trauma and mental health is to focus on how something happened. Reporters can ask questions like, "Can you tell me what happened that day," "How did you find out," "What's your fondest memory of your loved one," or "What do you want people to understand about what happened?" (It's equally crucial to not assume someone is unreliable if they can't provide a straightforward answer to any questions).

Personal space is another factor to consider, especially when working with someone who's been sexually assaulted. It's common to place a recording device as close to someone as possible to get quality audio, but a more considerate practice is to hand them the device and explain what placement would be ideal, explains Newman. Likewise, sources might need space to feel their emotions openly, stop the interview if they feel overwhelmed, and decline to answer anything that makes them uncomfortable.

But perhaps the most important thing a reporter can do during the interview process is show compassion. Having empathy and tact is what, essentially, underpins trauma-informed reporting. In 2019, when Brianna Sacks, an investigative reporter at BuzzFeed, was covering the Walmart shooting in El Paso by a white supremacist, she spent time with the family of Javier Amir Rodriguez — a 15-year-old who was killed. The teen's uncle had survived the shooting and invited Sacks to the hospital. She introduced herself and, for about 30 minutes, she just sat with them. Then she asked if they'd eaten before going to get everyone some food. When Dora Chavez, the teen's grandmother, began crying after watching a video of Javier, Sacks put her arm around Chavez's shoulders, who leaned into her and cried for a while. Sacks never interviewed the woman.

"I always just go back to being human first versus reporter and trying to put myself in their shoes and thinking about what I would want and need if I lost a family member or my child died in a mass shooting," says Sacks. "And I come back to: 'Someone who cares and listens.'"

This was the guiding principle for Tyler Tynes, a staff writer at GQ Magazine, as he covered the trial of Cardell Hayes, the man convicted of manslaughter for killing former New Orleans Saints player Will Smith in 2016. After months of going to court dates and being a visible, caring face in the crowd of reporters, a friend of Hayes took Tynes to a restaurant. There Tynes was able to see the effect the trial was having on Hayes' mother, Dawn, physically and emotionally as she picked at her food through tears. Even though Tynes wasn't able to interview her — it didn't seem like an appropriate time to approach her — their family hadn't given that level of access to anyone else and he was able to weave their struggle into a piece for SB Nation that looked at the effect a trial has on the loved ones of the accused.

"That moment is the moment that I think about any time I think about that trial," says Tynes, "They saw somebody who looked like them, who was just trying to understand them when an entire city did not want to."

with treatment, people do get better. His work here is indicative of in-depth, tactful interviewing and what's possible when a journalist is able and willing to collaborate with their sources.

Similar steps can be taken when approaching sources that have gone through physical trauma. When Kriston Capps, a journalist based in Washington, D.C., reached out to write about John Powers, an artist who lost several fingers in an accident, they'd been following each other online for at least a decade. During that time, the two built up a rapport online in the gradual way most of us build camaraderie with our long-time mutuals. When Powers started posting about his recovery, Capps was moved to reach out and ask if anyone had inquired about telling his story.

"Before I pitched the story, he and I talked about it for a long time, over a couple of calls. I think he trusted me because he has followed me for a long time," says Capps. "I was nervous about interviewing him, so I really gave my questions for him a lot of thought. I told him up front that I was going to ask him the kind of questions that a close personal friend would."

For seven or eight hours on a Saturday, Capps and the artist discussed what happened. They took breaks. It was a structured process that Capps hoped gave Powers the space to open up on his terms. And during the drafting process, Capps made sure every sentence was grounded in his interviews with Powers. "I wanted to be rigorous and structured and factual about writing about issues that were dark and messy and emotional," he says.

As journalists move forward in an interview, it's important to resist asking someone "why" they think a tragedy happened or "why" someone feels a certain

**"IF YOU ESTABLISH YOURSELF AS BEING WORTHY OF SOMEONE'S TRUST, PEOPLE ARE MORE WILLING TO ENGAGE"**

**ED YONG, THE ATLANTIC**



**G**iving survivors control over their narratives is imperative for building long-term trust. ProPublica and the Anchorage Daily News' 2020 project "Unheard," which shares the stories of 29 men and women who were sexually assaulted in Alaska, is a marquee example. During the reporting process, the journalists shared quotes with the people who were highlighted in the project to confirm their accuracy and gave them full creative control over how they were visually portrayed. The photographer allowed everyone to review their pictures once the photo sessions were finished. And when the written piece was completed, the reporters read the text to the survivors to ensure the tone was appropriate.

From the beginning, it was clear to those working on the project that "Unheard" wouldn't uphold traditional reporter and subject roles. Instead, the reporting and publishing process was designed so that survivors of sexual abuse felt safe. Michelle Theriault Boots and Kyle Hopkins, two reporters with the Anchorage Daily News who worked on the project, have both written stories that provide in-depth looks at people's lives. But "Unheard" was the first time either of them had taken such a deliberate approach where they facilitated the process of a source telling their own story.

The reporting team, says Hopkins, informed potential interviewees that there may be aspects of the process they might not want to participate in — such as the team needing to contact the person who assaulted them for comment. This was, understandably, a non-starter for some. But the 29 people who did end up in the final version of

the story were treated as if they were the team's partners.

Not every story will be able to go to the same lengths, but there are small choices journalists can make — like allowing someone to send you their favorite photo of themselves instead of choosing one for them. Another option is to ask the interviewee what they want people to take away from their story to help frame your writing.

Yong makes his sources the protagonist of their story. "If you portray them solely as this passive recipient of tragedy, especially as the passive recipient of the beneficence of the medical establishment, then you add to the problems they've already experienced," he says. "If you respect the sources as people, then you can avoid the trap of treating them as these macabre circus acts for people to gawk at. I don't want people to gawk at them. I want readers to empathize with them."

Once the drafting process is complete, the Dart Center's Newman recommends reporters do a gut check of their prose. "The thing that I ask journalists to do is, at the end of the story, when you've finished your product, do a check and say, 'If this was my aunt, my father, my mother, somebody I loved, is there anything I would change in the tone?'" she says. "That's a helpful way to know if you've accidentally absorbed some cultural tropes."

"If you establish yourself as being worthy of someone's trust, people are more willing to engage. People are more willing to open up and be vulnerable and share what they're really thinking," Yong says. "All of the practices we've talked about help the sources, but I think that they immensely help me as a reporter. It's not a zero-sum game. If we play our cards right, everyone wins." ■

**In a piece for the Los Angeles Times highlighting the cultural stigma around mental illness, reporter Joe Mozingo gained access to sources like Sergio Nuño (above) by partnering with a well-trusted hospital within the community**

FRANCINE ORR/LOS ANGELES TIMES



# DIVIDED

A man at a rally wearing a camouflage hat with 'TRUMP 2024' and an American flag, and a 'MAGA' t-shirt. He is looking to the right. The background is a crowd of people, some holding signs. The entire image has a red color overlay.

# WE FALL

A woman at a rally with her hair in a bun, wearing a grey t-shirt, holding a 'MAGA' sign. She is looking to the left. The background is a crowd of people. The entire image has a blue color overlay.

HOW POLITICAL COVERAGE  
IS CHANGING TO GET  
BEYOND POLARIZATION AND  
PARTISANSHIP

BY CELESTE KATZ MARSTON





**I**N WRITING ABOUT SARAH PALIN and her 2022 bid for Congress, T.A. Frank made a promise to readers — and to himself.

A past Palin critic, Frank set out on the reporting with “an avowedly open mind,” as he wrote in *The Washington Post* in July. He pledged to “fight my own mental shortcuts — such as viewing her moneymaking pursuits as cynical — and come up with the most generous theories of Palin that I could, given the facts on hand. It’s something we ought to be doing more of these days, anyway, if we’re to feel our way back to getting along.”

Ultimately, Frank was able to present a story not just about the former Alaska governor and 2008 Republican vice-presidential candidate herself, but about Americans, their politics, and their relationship to each other — and the media. It’s not by any means a story that gives Palin a pass; it’s a thoughtful attempt to look at a controversial, complex subject in a nuanced way in a time of political extremism and tension.

“This is a time when we all hate one another. You hate me, and I probably hate you, whoever you are. We know it isn’t good for us, however,” Frank wrote in *The Post*. “We know that when we meet many of these adversaries in the flesh, they have qualities that don’t fit into easy theories or diagnoses. We might be able to share a meal, or a yard, or even a country.”

In the context of crucial midterm elections, Americans are polarized and are having trouble simply talking to each other and agreeing on basic facts. Some of the standard practices of the media in covering politics and controversy aren’t helping bridge that divide — and, in fact, are exacerbating it. Complicating this quandary: a news culture and social media universe that steamroll nuance and amplify extremes, and the corrosive tendency of the press to center the “game” of politics — and the candidates and officials who “play” it — versus the problems the electorate deeply cares about and wants addressed.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: LYNSEY WEATHERSPOON/GETTY IMAGES

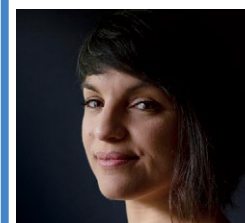
Of course, these divisions existed before the 2022 election cycle. A study released in 2020 by researchers from Brown and Stanford Universities found that the polarization gap — how negatively members of opposing political parties viewed each other — soared by nearly 70 percent between 1978 and 2016. The researchers said this was possibly due in part to the membership in the two major parties self-sorting more sharply along racial and religious lines in addition to ideology — making the people across the aisle look even more different.

In Congress, Pew has found, “Both parties have moved further away from the ideological center since the early 1970s. Democrats on average have become somewhat more liberal, while Republicans on average have become much more conservative.” One notable difference between the U.S. and countries where polarization declined over the same period, the study found, was the growing prevalence of partisan cable news networks in America versus the higher per-capita spending on public media elsewhere.

There’s a lot of blame to go around for America’s political schism. Still, as Elizabeth Kolbert has written in *The New Yorker*, “The fact that each party regards the other as a ‘serious threat’ doesn’t mean that they are equally threatening. The January 6th attack on the Capitol, the ongoing attempts to discredit the 2020 election, the new state laws that will make it more difficult for millions of people to vote, particularly in communities of color — only one party is responsible for these.”

Nevertheless, coverage of electoral politics, polarization, and other contentious issues can be more useful — and even more accurate — when it considers voters rather than just vote-seekers, explores divisions

PHOTOILLUSTRATIONS BY DAN ZEDEK



**“I THINK WHERE WE MISS OUT... IS TAKING THE TIME TO HEAR PEOPLE [OUT] FULLY, NOT JUST, ‘WHAT DO YOU THINK? TELL ME YOUR OPINION,’ BUT ‘WHERE DID THAT OPINION COME FROM?’”**

**MÓNICA GUZMÁN**  
Senior fellow for public practice, Braver Angels

without oversimplifying or overstating them, and identifies not only the existence of problems but possible solutions. Of course, there should be no nuance to some political stories. Political violence, election denial, voter suppression, racist attacks must all be called out and condemned. But a more modulated depiction of voters and issues can help deprive those looking to exploit and inflame division of a chance to spread misinformation or outright lies for their own political gain.

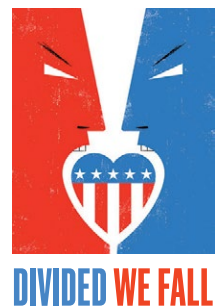
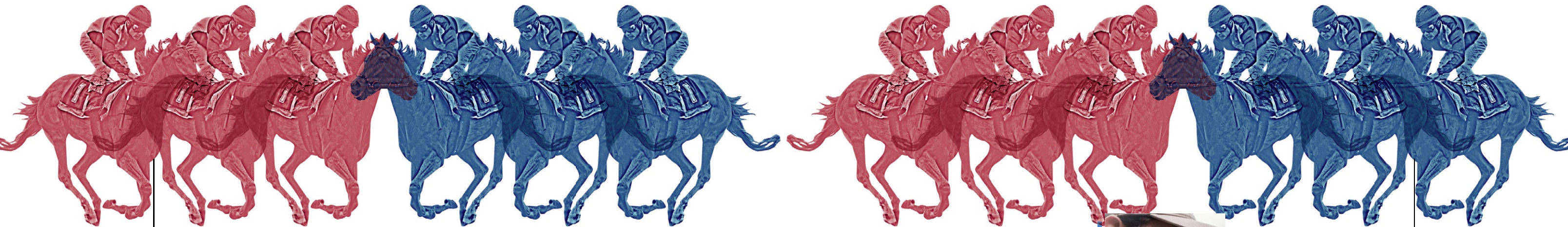
Here’s a look at some of the ways journalists and other experts are advancing coverage that gets beyond “us versus them.”

**A** PEW STUDY released in August found that Republicans and Democrats not only have negative views of the other party, but increasingly describe people in that other party as “as more closed-minded, dishonest, immoral and unintelligent than other Americans.”

In other words, it’s personal.

The rise in those feelings of hostility in just the last few years has been jaw-dropping. In 2016, about 35 percent of Democrats and 47 percent of Republicans thought people in the other party were more immoral than other Americans; in 2022, Pew found, that shot up to 63 percent for Democrats and 72 percent for Republicans. Pew also found that “most registered vot-





ers — regardless of whether they identify with a party or are independents who lean toward a party — say it is unlikely they will cast a ballot for a candidate from the other party for any office over the next several years.”

Extreme partisan reactions ratcheted up among allies of former President Donald Trump over the summer after the FBI executed a search warrant at the former president’s Florida estate. The agents were looking for documents Trump was not authorized to keep when he completed his term as president. They retrieved more than 20 boxes of materials, including some marked “top secret,” per court documents. Some of those who had rallied to Trump’s patently false claims that the 2020 election was rigged against him amped up their violent rhetoric after the search, with the most enraged even talking about civil war. Within days, a veteran who had expressed support for Trump on social media attempted to breach an FBI field office in Ohio, firing a nail gun at law enforcement officers. The magistrate judge who approved the warrant became the target of death threats and antisemitic slurs, and the Department of Homeland Security warned of increased menacing of federal officials.

Most people are not that extreme — nor are most people’s views, even on contentious issues. While gun regulation is often painted as a bright dividing line during campaigns, more than 70 percent of Americans want stricter gun laws, according to a recent University of Chicago/AP poll. Research also shows that Americans have increasingly complex views of issues related to gender, with most thinking trans people should be protected from discrimination.

News reporting is “oftentimes the only way in which we get to actually see the other side,” says Dan Vallone, U.S. director of More in Common, a non-partisan non-profit that studies polarization. At a time when partisans “see the other political side as not just an opponent, but as a threat, [not] just on policy goals, but on the survival

of the country, on their own family’s well-being, [the] stakes are very high, and it’s a critical moment for all of us — not just journalists, but citizens — to do a much better job of trying to grapple with more complex descriptions and depictions of other Americans.”

It’s a tough job for a lot of reasons, including what’s called the perception gap — the difference between what Side A believes Side B thinks and what Side B actually thinks. The higher a person’s perception gap, the more distorted — and negative — are their views of people on the other side. “People with large perception gaps are more likely to describe their opponents as ‘hateful,’ ‘ignorant,’ and ‘bigoted,’” according to More in Common’s research. The more media people consume, the wider the gap. In fact, people who said in a More in Common/YouGov survey that they read the news “most of the time” had views of the other side that were three times more distorted than occasional news consumers.

The largest increases in the perception gap, per the More in Common/YouGov study, were associated with consumers of right-leaning outlets, including Breitbart News, Drudge Report, and the Sean Hannity Show. People who consumed news from those sources had a perception gap nine to 11 percentage points higher than those who didn’t. The perception gaps tied to liberal outlets such as Slate, BuzzFeed, Daily Kos, and HuffPost were smaller, but still considerable — about eight percentage points higher than those who didn’t get information from those sites. Fox viewers had a larger gap than viewers of MSNBC and CNN. Only consumers of the three major television networks — ABC, CBS, and NBC — were “associated with better understanding [of] other Americans’ views.”

Compounding the problem, Vallone adds, the most engaged news consumers tend to have the least politically diverse social networks. “It helps to have people of the other political party in your social network to reduce your perception gap” through exposure to varying

viewpoints, Vallone says. What’s more, according to More in Common research, a relatively small percentage — 26 percent — of Americans report sharing social media posts about politics, and the ones who do share tend to have a higher perception gap than those who don’t. “The political content we see on social media is therefore disproportionately from people with a more distorted understanding of the other side, further adding to the problem,” says a summary of the research.

**INVESTIGATIVE REPORTER** Amanda Ripley wrote about diametrically opposed entrenchments in her book “High Conflict: Why We Get Trapped and How We Get Out.” In essence, conflict shifts into “high” gear when people start to view each other as “us” and “them,” or “right” and “wrong,” or even “good” and “evil.” As Ripley has written, when people feel threatened, they become hypervigilant: “In this hypervigilant state, we feel an involuntary need to defend our side and attack the other. That anxiety renders us immune to new information. In other words: no amount of investigative reporting or leaked documents will change our mind, no matter what.”

Giving voice to people who are conflicted about an issue — whether it be how to spend tax dollars or whether to mandate Covid vaccines for public-facing workers — should not be seen as diluting a story, but as enriching it and making it more accurate, Ripley says.

Based on her own work with conflict mediators, Ripley has some prescriptions for reporters covering conflict-ridden events and issues, including elections. She suggests amplifying the stories of people who don’t hold standard, easily categorized views on controversial issues or simply haven’t made up their minds, because



**“IT HELPS TO HAVE PEOPLE OF THE OTHER POLITICAL PARTY IN YOUR SOCIAL NETWORK TO REDUCE YOUR PERCEPTION GAP”**

**DAN VALLONE**  
U.S. Director,  
More in Common

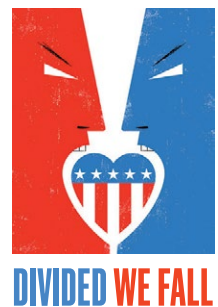
it presents a real-world view of how not everyone falls into one column or the other on disputed subjects.

She also advocates for asking questions that explore people’s underlying beliefs and motivations, not just their positions — as The Atlantic did about abortion in its Up for Debate newsletter in May, enabling it to gather and present an array of compelling, diverse personal stories by simply asking people what they thought. One respondent said she generally considered abortion “a moral wrong that ends a life” — but also favored discussing “looser restrictions on late-term abortions” in cases where it’s revealed that “the child has a condition that is not compatible with life.”

Braver Angels uses “bridging” techniques — some of which derive from approaches used in couples therapy — to get people at extremes of the political spectrum to actively listen to each other. The group connects people through “Walk a Mile in My News” pairings “designed to break people out of their media silos by getting them to read articles from the other side of the political divide, and get to know someone who appreciates what those articles are saying,” according to a piece published on the Braver Angels website by Mónica Guzmán, senior fellow for public practice at the organization.

In the case of political news coverage, “a lot of people [just] don’t think that the people creating that media even know what their concerns truly are,” says Guzmán.





In one session, two women — “red” Wynette and “blue” Vera — read and talked about voter rights and election integrity. Vera sent Wynette a New York Times piece that called restrictive voting laws “Jim Crow 2.0,” for example. Wynette sent Vera an Atlanta Journal-Constitution story on two GOP lawmakers who deliberately used fake signatures as a test to apply successfully for absentee ballots. The women were ultimately able to have a civil, genuine conversation — and a better understanding of why they still disagreed on key points.

“When it comes to understanding what an issue is truly about, I think where we miss out ... is taking the time to hear people [out] fully, not just, ‘What do you think? Tell me your opinion,’ but ‘Where did that opinion come from? What are the experiences that inform that for you? And then what are the concerns that animated for you?’ If you can get some of those experiences and concerns behind somebody’s opinion ... you give your readers a way into that person’s perspective,” Guzmán says.

Also, there is ample room for a reckoning about how social media algorithms distribute and reward content. Research published in *Nature Human Behavior* in February found that “the popularity of a news source is weakly associated with its reliability” — understood as the source’s credibility and transparency. The scholars suggested creating an algorithm that boosted stories from outlets with more partisan diversity among its readership, because those sources tend to be more reliable. The approach could also help control the spread of extreme misinformation.

Meanwhile, as Ripley suggests, thoughtfully conveying that no group is monolithic can go a long way. As can talking to people who have changed their minds about a controversial topic. One example: A February *Guardian* story about a group of former vaccine skeptics working to help others who are hesitant find science-based answers to their concerns about Covid-19 shots. The piece spends time laying out the controversial issue —

vaccine hesitancy — and explains how people are trying to address it on a grassroots level. It also manages to examine the underlying fears and worries of those who oppose vaccines, but without falling into the trap of letting their rationales stand on the same plane as empirical evidence.

**A**BORTION IS often held up as one of the most classically divisive issues in the U.S. and is often used as a litmus test for candidates. However, this simply isn’t as much of a 50-50 issue as some news coverage would have you believe. A June 2022 Pew report showed, “A 61% majority of U.S. adults say abortion should be legal in all or most cases, while 37% think abortion should be illegal in all or most cases.” That’s been the case for the last few years, according to Pew. The organization also reported that when it comes to the Supreme Court’s overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, which federally enshrined the right to legal abortion, “Nearly six-in-ten adults (57%) disapprove of the court’s sweeping decision, including 43% who strongly disapprove.”

Katie Woodruff, social science fellow in reproductive and maternal health at Advancing New Standards in Reproductive Health, based at the University of California San Francisco, studied how three top news sources — *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Associated Press* — covered abortion in 2013 and 2016. “Most of the time when abortion was in the news, it was covered in a political context — so not as a health issue or even a quote-unquote women’s issue,” Woodruff says. “Even when it was discussed substantively, it was in sort of a partisan, horseshoe kind of analysis, like who wins and who loses among the political parties or candidates by using the issue of abortion in one way or another.”

NPR, among others, has explained how it handles charged phrases such as “fetal heartbeat” and “par-

tial-birth abortion.” NPR’s policy as stated in 2019 was grounded in medical terminology related to human development, not the language preferred by politicians or activists on either side of the debate. It was also partly based on the guidelines of *The Associated Press*, which got some static this year when it issued style guidance on the use of terms such as “pregnant people” and “people seeking abortions” in consideration of conceptions among those who do not identify as women.

An example of coverage that got past the immediate political implications was the data-driven reporting and interactive graphics presented by NPR in August, which focused on the reality on the ground and showed that states with the toughest abortion laws also tend to have higher rates of child poverty, higher rates of uninsurance among women aged 19 to 64, and a larger share of people living in “maternity care deserts.”

This is not to say that there’s no room for stories that focus on political controversy, daily “trail reporting,” or the mechanics of campaigns and elections. But, in a world full of either-or political choices, covering politics with more nuance doesn’t require an either-or dimension. Experts both inside media and collaborating to improve it recommend several tracks, including changing the way we focus on politicians themselves and shifting how we listen to and cover the people actually voting in elections (or opting out).

**F**OR RIPLEY, it’s worth thinking about what readers and voters actually need to make a decision on or before Election Day. “Everybody has a camera in their pocket, so they don’t need you to be the first on the scene at a major national political rally repeating what happened,” she says. “I don’t think people need near-



**“IF [YOU] BELIEVE THAT... CITIZENS ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT ACTORS, THEN THE COVERAGE SHOULD BE CITIZEN-FOCUSED”**

**JENNIFER BRANDEL**  
Chief Executive Officer,  
Hearken

ly as much who, what, when, where as they do why and how.”

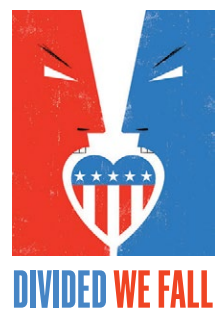
That could mean setting up a web page or email address, as *The Texas Tribune* has, to ask voters questions like, “What’s at stake for you this election cycle? What issues would you like to better understand?” It could be giving readers a data-driven glimpse into what’s on the minds of their neighbors ahead of the election, as *Axios* started doing earlier this year, making the info publicly searchable by congressional district, representative, and even address. Or it could be a helpful explainer, such as one from *Mountain State Spotlight* in April that laid out not only why two West Virginia House incumbents were running against each other (redistricting) and how they differed, but also who could vote, how, and when.

Jennifer Brandel, chief executive officer of the engagement platform Hearken, says actively listening to audiences can shift election coverage from what politicians want to say to what people are interested in learning more about.

“Following candidates and reporting back to the public, ‘Here’s what candidates are saying,’ whether it’s at a press conference or on the campaign trail, [lets] candidates drive the agenda of what they want the public to know, versus if [you] believe that it’s true that in a democracy, citizens are the most important actors, then the coverage should be citizen-focused,” she says.

Brandel has worked with NYU’s Jay Rosen on a





“Citizens Agenda” approach to reporting that gives the audience a bigger say in how stories are selected and produced. “The Citizen’s Agenda is really all about asking the electorate, ‘What do you not know that you want politicians to be talking about as they compete for your votes?’” Brandel says. “When newsrooms optimize for relationships and relevance and trust, [they] include the people that they’re serving in the decision-making process, rather than assuming they know what’s best and kind of going with whatever is the fastest and cheapest to produce.”

To that end, programs like Election SOS and Democracy SOS, in concert with Solutions Journalism Network (SJN), Harken, Poynter, and other partners, are helping newsrooms identify and rethink how they handle coverage, including soliciting questions and comments from the audience and incorporating those throughout the reporting. Democracy SOS has awarded training fellowships to an array of news outlets, especially in swing states, with a goal of helping the industry “replace stories about conflicting and competing polls and candidates — which we know contribute to distrust — with more deep, ongoing examinations of important social issues,” according to its website. Election SOS this year offered training sessions specifically geared toward midterms coverage, including material on identifying and communicating with audiences newsrooms aren’t reaching.

This midterm cycle is a hot one for swing state Wisconsin, given the high profile Senate and governor races. As The New York Times has reported, the GOP nominee for governor, Tim Michels, is a Trump ally who “has embraced calls to dismantle the state’s bipartisan election commission, invoked conspiratorial films about the 2020 election and even expressed openness to the false idea that Mr. Trump’s loss can still be decertified.”

The Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel is pursuing what it calls “Wisconsin Main Street Agenda” with the La

Follette School of Public Affairs at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Wisconsin Public Radio. The project is asking citizens what issues they want their politicians to talk about and also holding a series of in-person events around the state that gives locals a chance to air their concerns.

“It’s a chance for people to have a thoughtful discussion in an age when thoughtful discussion and deliberation is really hard to do,” says David Haynes, who oversees the Journal-Sentinel’s Ideas Lab and solutions journalism efforts, and has worked with Democracy SOS. “We’ve got politics right now that is all bollixed up because we can’t talk to one another very well, and we’ve got social media platforms that don’t encourage deliberation — in fact, just the contrary; they encourage conflict.”

The project has given the paper insight into not only where partisans diverge, but a nuanced view of issues that multiple groups identify as a concern — each in their own way. For example, as Haynes reported in August based on survey results, “people who identify themselves as Republicans, Democrats and Independents, say they are concerned about our democracy. But they may mean different things: For Republicans, it might mean ensuring that elections are secure. For Democrats and Independents, it might mean concerns about a continuing refusal by some on the political right to accept that Joe Biden won the 2020 presidential election.”

In Pennsylvania, another battleground state, public radio station WITF largely eschews political coverage that solely focuses on the outcome of horserace polls, because even when they’re accurate, they don’t hold much news value and can even “potentially suppress votes ... We’ll use a line or two about a poll, but we’re not focusing a story on a poll,” says Tim Lambert, multimedia news director for the station, which is also part of the Democracy SOS 2022 cohort.

Scott Blanchard, WITF’s director of journalism, says the station, which serves 17 counties in central and south-central Pennsylvania, generally turns away from blow-by-blow coverage of campaign attack ads, Facebook brawls, and “all that sort of infighting and political strategy stuff.” How to treat candidate endorsement stories, which can matter in certain instances but can also have a definite scorekeeping feel to them, is also something the station has discussed, including considering when to limit them to the digital site versus making them the focus of a radio story.

Instead, WITF is focusing on digging into issues surrounding their big midterm races — and considering who to craft that coverage for, not just about. “What we believe [is] there’s a segment of the population ... not on either extreme or either fringe that is actually looking for good, reliable, trustworthy information about issues that they care about,” says Blanchard. “That’s who we should be talking to — not the people on either edge.”

Sharon Jarvis, an associate professor of communications at the University of Texas, has researched how the language used in articles can affect how citizens see themselves within the electoral system. When the press portrays voters as having agency versus being pawns of political strategists, it can have a lasting impact.

Adults who read articles in the “mobilized participant” frame — which depicted voters as making choices and being mobilized by parties and candidates — responded more positively and were more likely to “depict citizens as efficacious,” according to Jarvis’ research. Those who read an article in the “isolated spectator” frame — which depicted voters as pawns of political strategists — were more inclined to talk about elections



**“WE’VE GOT SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS THAT DON’T ENCOURAGE DELIBERATION ... JUST THE CONTRARY, THEY ENCOURAGE CONFLICT”**

**DAVID HAYNES**  
Ideas Lab Editor,  
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

as a “negative game that did not involve them” and to voice frustration with both politics and the media, she found.

In a recent interview with The Whole Story, a publication of the Solutions Journalism Network, Jarvis also explained that presenting solutions to election threats gives people a sense of control relative to stories that highlight the dangers without exploring how they might be avoided or addressed. A test by Jarvis and others at the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life at the University of Texas at Austin of voting-related social media content also found “tweets written to increase awareness of voter suppression without offering individual-level solutions decrease trust in the election.”

In other words, focusing on the problem but not the solution creates more distrust, pushing audiences away a time when journalism needs to bring them in.

Frank says the “alternative perspective” he tried with his piece on Sarah Palin may not be suited to every political or election story. Still, “it’s useful for journalists to keep in mind that a lot of the actions taken by our fellow humans can be as easily cast in a positive light as in a negative light, and, in political journalism, which light we choose can easily depend on whether we like that person’s politics,” he says. “If we respect disaffected readers enough to understand and remedy some of what made them lose faith, then surely journalists can rebuild trust, bit by bit.” ■



# A “KISS OF FREEDOM” FOR TURKEY’S PRESS

Independent journalists  
are stubbornly persisting  
in digital formats from  
newsletters to video  
to podcasts

BY EMRE KIZILKAYA





# W

**HEN TWO YOUNG JOURNALISTS** were married in a

Turkish prison in 2017, they vowed to be always together “in bondage and in freedom, in autocracy and in democracy.”

Minez Bayülgen, a journalist with the news website Diken at the time, had only a few minutes to marry her colleague Tunca Öğreten during a half-an-hour prison visit. Öğreten, who was also a journalist at Diken then, was in jail for reporting on the leaked emails of Berat Albayrak, a former minister and President Tayyip Erdoğan’s son-in-law.

A few months after this unusual wedding, another journalist couple — Kadri Gürsel, who was a former columnist for the Milliyet newspaper and a former Agence France-Presse (AFP) reporter, and his wife and colleague, Nazire Kalkan Gürsel — passionately kissed each other in front of the same prison in Istanbul’s Silivri district. Gürsel was released after a nearly year-long arrest during the trial of Cumhuriyet journalists for “aiding a terrorist organization without being its member.”

I was in front of the Silivri prison, along with dozens of journalists and press freedom advocates, on that September night when the Gürsels were reunited. AFP photographer Yasin Akgul captured the moment, entitling his iconic shot “the Kiss of Freedom.”

In 2017, Turkey was the world’s worst offender when it came to jailing reporters for their work. After a brief period of improvement, this year the government launched a fresh wave of mass arrests targeting reporters and criminalizing journalism with new laws ahead of the elections in which Erdoğan is seeking another term. In addition to the ongoing criminalization of journalism, Turkish journalists face physical and online attacks, hefty administrative fines for critical reporting, strategic private and government lawsuits, insufficient financial and technological resources, low public trust, and the algorithmic bias of digital platforms that boost pro-government media outlets. These challenges generate a powerful chilling effect, spreading self-censorship and creating the false perception that independent journalism in Turkey is no longer possible.

But Turkish journalism is giving itself its own kiss of freedom. Many independent journalists are stubbornly persisting with a mission to sustain quality journalism in Turkey despite the political, social, and technological challenges. Although the mainstream media is almost totally controlled by Erdoğan and his allies, a new breed of independent reporting flourishes in various digital mediums and formats, from newsletters to video to podcasts. There are dozens of examples, but here are four in the vanguard of next-generation Turkish journalism.

## KAPSÜL

**T**hree years after they married in a prison, Bayülgen and Öğreten, who was released in December 2017, founded Kapsül, a newsletter that began appearing in the first days of the Covid-19 pandemic. Launched as a one-page factsheet that filtered out the disinformation, propaganda, and editorializing around Covid, Kapsül now has 54,000 subscribers, more than the real circulation of many newspapers controlled by Erdoğan and his cronies.

“A news bombardment started with the pandemic,” says Bayülgen, “and we were confused, as were many readers. Experts were speaking, sometimes voicing conflicting opinions, and graphs and data were shared, although it was hard to verify them.” Eyeing 100,000 subscribers by the end of 2022, Bayülgen and Öğreten are on their way to financial sustainability, attracting donations from readers as well as commercial investors and sponsorship deals for their daily and weekly newsletters.

In addition to covering important stories, Kapsül is committed to treating its journalists well. “I wish the priority of media outlets in Turkey was investing in their journalists,” Bayülgen says, adding that Kapsül’s goal is to provide better professional conditions — shorter working hours, private health insurance, and professional equipment, as well as “humane” salaries and severance fees — to its growing team of reporters. “There are many journalists in Turkey who keep producing news bravely — and paying the price.”

That price can be astonishingly high. In 1995 when he was an AFP reporter, Gürsel was kidnapped by militants from the outlawed Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). He was fired by Milliyet in 2015, four years after the newspaper was



PREVIOUS SPREAD: YASIN AKGUL/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES  
ABOVE: HACO BISKIN/GAZETE DUVAR/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

sold to the Demirören Group, a staunchly pro-government corporation that owns assets in the energy, industry, mining, real estate, and media sectors. According to Gürsel’s memoir, the corporation’s owner, Erdoğan Demirören, offered to keep paying his salary if the columnist would stop writing his columns, which were critical of the ruling party, during the run-up to the 2015 elections. Gürsel declined what he described as “a dirty offer” and was fired. He was soon hired as a columnist and editorial adviser of Cumhuriyet, which was one of the last major independent newspapers in Turkey then. Soon afterward, Gürsel was imprisoned for some 11 months during the controversial Cumhuriyet trial, which was slammed by press freedom groups as yet another attempt by the Erdoğan administration to capture independent media. The evidence in the indictment was essentially news reports and op-eds criticizing Erdoğan and his political allies. IPI, which monitored the trial, noted that “the case against key figures at one of Turkey’s last three independent daily newspapers involved no crime, no evidence and no justice.”

Gürsel, now a member of the administrative council of the Paris-based Reporters Without Borders, believes the seed of Turkish journalism’s future is being sown in smaller newsrooms and start-ups. Today’s smaller outlets may one day become the “new mainstream” media if they can grow organically “through structural, financial, and institutional enhancement,” he says.

Gürsel thinks that in today’s harsh environment, solidarity among journalists is the key to creating that infrastructure. He believes that independent outlets should defend each other by uniting around the common mission of press freedom. Solidarity serves as “co-concoons for good journalism that would hatch when the best moment will come or like seeds that would grow

**PREVIOUS SPREAD: Kadri Gürsel kisses his wife Nazire Kalkan Gürsel after his release from Silivri prison on Sept. 26, 2017 in Istanbul**

**ABOVE: Police in Istanbul arrest AFP photographer Bulent Kilic who was covering a Pride march that had been banned by authorities, June 2021**

fine flowers when democracy would wash away the toxic agents of authoritarianism in the soil,” he adds.

And there are signs of solidarity, even amidst competitors. When independent broadcaster TELE1 was fined 1.8 million Turkish liras in June for coverage unfavorable to Erdoğan and his allies, its competitor Halk TV offered to pay the fine because, as Halk TV’s Chair Cafer Mahiroglu said in a tweet in June 2022, “we should light the candles against the darkness all together.”

## MEDYASCOPE

**M**edyascope was founded in 2015 by Ruşen Çakir, a senior journalist who worked for some of Turkey’s most prominent media outlets in broadcast and print journalism. Initially focusing solely on video journalism and political news analysis distributed via social media platforms, the outlet has recently significantly increased its reach and impact.

Only a few months after its founding, Medyascope had already become a destination for news and analysis, such as when it provided all-day coverage of the Ankara bombings in 2015, the deadliest terror attack in Turkey’s history, or when it aired a live video interview with former deputy prime minister Bülent Arınç, revealing that the top politician was now highly critical of the ruling party that he had co-founded.

Medyascope’s impactful reporting from the field continues. When Turkey’s mainstream media outlets, captured by the ruling party, were mostly silent about the government’s poor response to devastating forest fires in the summer of 2021, Medyascope sent multiple reporters to the worst-affected areas, producing original jour-





## SÖZCÜ

Legacy newsrooms are innovating, too. The daily *Sözcü*, which has one of the highest circulations in the country, is also among the most trusted news brands, according to the latest Reuters Institute Digital News Report. *Sözcü*'s chief digital officer, Reha Başoğul, stresses that it is trying to innovate with a “reader-first” mindset. *Sözcü* “contextualizes” the first-party data of millions of its active users to understand their behaviors and needs. “We enrich this data with surveys, user experience studies, customer relations management databases and in many other ways to cater the best content and the best products to our readers,” he adds.

Başoğul emphasizes that *Sözcü* is not only trusted by its audience but also by its advertisers. Unlike many digital publishers in Turkey, the newspaper prioritizes user engagement over page views as its primary metric. It also applies a unique policy for brand safety, blacklisting certain types of digital ads by using not only legal and commercial measures but also ethical ones. Başoğul believes that such steps enabled *Sözcü* to maintain reliable ad revenue even in such a harsh political and economic environment.

Yet legacy newsrooms are not immune from the Erdoğan administration’s efforts to muzzle critical coverage. Five journalists and two columnists from *Sözcü* were sentenced to jail in 2020 — again with an indictment that included no evidence other than their published articles. According to a report by Turkish law professor Yaman Akdeniz and researcher Ozan Güven, hundreds of news articles by *Sözcü* are blocked or deleted by Turkish authorities. The themes of the articles are varied but many of them cover issues like allegations of corruption related to government officials and opposition politicians criticizing the ruling party.

Çiğdem Toker, an investigative journalist whose expertise is economic issues, is one of *Sözcü*'s most widely read columnists and one of the reporters who is targeted most by the government. She consistently reveals cases of corruption and abuse of power, often involving public tenders for the government’s “crazy construction projects.” One of her columns was digitally blocked after she revealed that the massive Kanal Istanbul project, an artificial waterway strongly advocated for by Erdoğan, would cost double the normal amount due to the apparently corrupt process of its public tender. She’s also consistently the target of Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPP) lawsuits brought by powerful people like Erdoğan’s son-in-law, Selcuk Bayraktar, and a number of companies that get lucrative government contracts. In March, a court ruled that Toker “defamed” a foundation co-founded by Bayraktar in a news report. She was forced to pay nearly \$1,700 in compensation.

Criminal lawsuits and claims for damages “can cow especially younger reporters who work without job security,” Toker says, which can lead to self-censorship. “For more seasoned journalists, such lawsuits are not frightening but they consume our time and energy. From the moment such a lawsuit is launched, you find

Since Ruşen Çakır founded Medyascope, the outlet has become a top destination for news and analysis

“THERE ARE MANY JOURNALISTS IN TURKEY WHO KEEP PRODUCING NEWS BRAVELY — AND PAYING THE PRICE”  
MINEZ BAYÜLGEN,  
FOUNDER OF KAPSÜL

nalism the public craved. The outlet, which had won the International Press Institute’s Free Media Pioneer Award in 2016, is now also lauded for its diversified content.

Today, more than 3,000 readers and viewers regularly donate to Medyascope, funding a staff of 50 in four towns in Turkey; another 50 journalists work on a freelance basis for the outlet, according to Medyascope’s news coordinator Kaya Heyse. That team produces around 2,000 pieces of original journalism and some 750 videos each month for its website as well as four YouTube channels. Besides Turkey’s three largest cities — Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir — Medyascope also has an office in the Kurdish-majority southeastern province of Diyarbakir. As Kurdish media outlets in the region and their journalists are targeted in government crackdowns, the importance of Medyascope’s continued coverage from the field in the southeast is even more important. Medyascope’s Diyarbakir-based reporter Ferit Aslan covers crucial issues for the region from the government’s persecution of opposition politicians and journalists to things that affect the daily life of the local community like how Kurdish farmers cope with skyrocketing inflation to why the house of the only Assyrian family in a Kurdish village was recently assaulted.

Last year, Medyascope was targeted by a pro-government media smear campaign labeling it as a “traitor” for accepting grants from U.S.- and E.U.-based non-governmental organizations. It happened even though Medyascope — unlike most media outlets in Turkey — shares that it is also supported by journalism grants from institutions including the European Endowment for Democracy, Heinrich Böll Stiftung, and Sida.

Still, Heyse says reader donations and digital ads are crucial revenue sources: “We reach around 10 million people on all platforms each month. We are now planning to set up data analytics and sales departments.” The main challenges for startups, according to Heyse, are “the lack of institutionalization and money.” Turkey needs more examples of digital native newsrooms that produce “proper” journalism and new business models to sustain them.

yourself trying to explain to the public that your news report is not something illegal.”

As Toker notes, younger reporters looking to enter journalism face even more daunting challenges, especially if they come from minority populations.

Yağmur Kaya, a young Kurdish journalist from eastern Turkey, says her first job applications were all refused. Kaya states that each refusal came just after she stated she was from Kars, a town with a large Kurdish population. Frustrated that she was discriminated against due to her ethnicity, she eventually stopped looking for a journalism job and worked at a cosmetics company instead.

In 2015, Kaya started her dream job: She was hired by Dicle News Agency (DIHA), a Diyarbakir-based “pro-Kurdish” outlet, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, to do, in her words, “journalism in defense of those who suffer, those who cope with poverty and whose rights are violated.” This perspective is what Turkey’s mainstream media, dominated by “aging Turkish men,” always lacked, Kaya says. But DIHA was shut down with 18 other media outlets by a presidential decree in 2016, and Kaya found herself unemployed again. Now as a freelance journalist, Kaya has been reporting from all over Turkey, covering civic protests, government censorship, and forest fires.

In the past two years, Kaya has interviewed workers who were beaten by the police to break their strike in

“I STRIVE TO BE MORE COURAGEOUS, MORE DARING, AND MORE REBELLIOUS AS MUCH AS THE LEVEL OF DIFFICULTY AND TYRANNY INCREASES”

YAĞMUR KAYA,  
KURDISH JOURNALIST



RIGHT: COURTESY OF RUŞEN ÇAKIR  
LEFT: COURTESY OF ÇİĞDEM TOKER

Istanbul, investigated the awful conditions in animal shelters, and reported from the demonstrations of women against femicide. She became the story in March 2021 when police arrested her while covering a demonstration of Boğaziçi University students, who were protesting the government’s anti-democratic moves to “capture” this institution, too. Like countless women in Turkey, Kaya had to cope with sexual harassment while doing her job. “I get used to silly remarks by men, like those who sarcastically ask why I have make-up and use perfume, because you know, I’m a journalist,” she says. Verbal abuse is the norm, and physical harassment is not rare if you’re a female journalist in Turkey.

Çiğdem Toker, an investigative journalist who focuses on economic issues, is one of *Sözcü*'s most widely read columnists — and one of the reporters who is targeted most by the government

After many arrests and instances of sexual harassment by men, Kaya vows to “find a new way” for journalism amid this battle on so many fronts. “As a woman and as a journalist, the challenges that I am facing in this political climate are all expected,” she says. “Instead of complaining, I strive to be more courageous, more daring, and more rebellious as much as the level of difficulty and tyranny increases.” That courage and daring can be observed among other, increasingly diverse news outlets.

## PODFRESH

Uraz Kaspar, an Armenian goldsmith-turned-entrepreneur, is one of the three co-founders of Podfresh, which emerged from the trio’s earlier success with Medyapod, Turkey’s first podcast network. Kaspar said he won a scholarship to Lomonosov Moscow State University’s Journalism department in 1999 but chose to stay in Turkey to get a degree in design and become a university lecturer. “Podcasting as a medium finally gave me a chance to combine my experience in design and business, as well as my passion for journalism,” he says.

Podfresh hosts more than 350 independent podcasts, accounting for almost 20 percent of the shows produced regularly in Turkey. It has grown its revenues by 15 percent on average each month. This growth, according to Kaspar, is the result of local and international brands’ rising interest in sponsorship and advertising in Turkish-language podcast content. The Kisa Dalga (Short Wave) podcast, Daktilo (Typewriter) 1984 podcast, and the Kapsül newsletter’s daily podcast Bülten (Bulletin) are among the best examples of next-generation journalism in Turkey,” says Kaspar.

Podfresh also entered into a collective bargaining agreement with Turkey’s Journalists’ Union (TGS), the first podcast network outside North America to do so, while also providing more than 300 free sessions of podcast training to TGS members. “Our efforts related to journalism are not a part of our revenue model,” Kaspar says. “We see them as non-profit NGO activities for the public good.” He adds that many members of Turkey’s Gen Z have their first contact with news through podcasts, and the human touch of the voice enables the audience to engage more deeply with the journalist and the news. Almost none of them buy a newspaper or watch the evening news on TV. Podcasts can be one of the most powerful ways to connect the young with journalism.

Passion, perseverance, and innovation all play a role in sustaining the improbable survival of independent journalism in Turkey. As Erdoğan seeks reelection in 2023, and with Turkey’s Russian-style disinformation law on the agenda, the country is at a crossroads of bondage and freedom. Gürsel, for one, is confident. “I’m paradoxically more optimistic than ever, given the fact that the media outlets and journalists targeted [by Erdoğan’s regime] are the ones who have been sustained so far by their resistance and resilience,” he says. “I see no reason not to believe that they will intelligently outperform this weakened and confused regime at this highly critical moment of Turkey’s history.” ■





# HOW TO INCREASE COVERAGE OF **ASSASSINATIONS,** SAFELY

Reporting on targeted killings has lagged in South Africa, but networks of journalists are helping piece these stories together

BY PAUL McNALLY





**People mourn at a candlelight vigil for civil servant Babita Deokaran, a corruption whistleblower who worked for the Gauteng Department of Health and was assassinated in 2021**

According to data by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC), assassinations in South Africa are on the rise. Between 2000 and 2020, there were more than 1,800 assassinations — 858 of which happened in the last five years, the initiative’s research shows. That means that in the six years between 2015 and 2020 almost the same number of assassinations happened as during the period between 2000 and 2015. But coverage of these killings has lagged.

This is understandable, says Julian Rademeyer, a journalist and director of the Organized Crime Observatory for East and Southern Africa at GI-TOC, noting that his organization has found that after coverage of the initial murder these stories are often forgotten. “The media space in South Africa has shrunk with smaller newsrooms, smaller budgets, and little local and rural coverage. That means that in a province like KwaZulu-Natal [where Mkhize was killed], there is very little follow-up coverage.”

There has been media coverage, but given the scale of the crisis, it has been superficial, Rademeyer adds. “The practice of taking a story and running with it over time has gone. We need to document this violence in a way that forces action,” he says. “There needs to be constant pressure on a set of politicians that are mostly out of touch with their citizens.”

That vigilance could come at a cost to the personal safety of journalists and their families and any whistleblowers who come forward to provide crucial information in the reporting process. Journalists around the world are increasingly under threat of harassment and detention — and in some cases of being tortured or killed — and most news outlets don’t have the resources to adequately protect them. It’s imperative that we consider their safety as we advocate for more coverage of potentially dangerous topics. The Committee to Protect Journalists’ annual Global Impunity Index states that “Somalia remains the world’s worst country for unsolved killings of journalists.” And, according to the same research, no one has been held accountable in 81 percent of cases worldwide where a journalist was murdered between 2011 and 2021.

With regards to my own safety, covering assassinations has made me hypervigilant when it comes to covering every story, no matter what the topic. Even if there isn’t an assassination featured in my story, I’ve become aware that certain actors can still use a contract killing, part of the economy of violence in South Africa, as an instrument to silence me.

“Effectively it is about risk versus reward,” says Colin Pereira, chief strategist on journalist safety for the

Committee to Protect Journalists. “Whenever you are dealing with people who have no respect for human life, like assassins, and also when there is money involved (even if the amount is relatively small) and you threaten that money supply or their reputations, then the risk is immense. As a journalist, you need to always do this analysis of the risk in advance.”

Pereira says that journalists often get focused to such an extent on their stories that even if they know the risks, they will ignore them or convince themselves that those risks do not apply to them. When you calculate the risk, you need to think about the impact your reporting has on your life and your family, Pereira stresses. CPJ suggests investing “time in understanding the security implications of your topic; identifying the major actors and learning their motivations.” And be clear about whether you want to be identified. Skip the byline if the story will be appearing in a publication that is seen as an adversary to the state.

One organization devoted to keeping journalists safe is Periodistas de a Pie, a Mexican collaborative that seeks to elevate the quality of the country’s journalism through trainings, network building, and sharing resources. In addition to training up journalists in investigative techniques, reporting strategies, and other technical skills, Periodistas de a Pie also addresses the personal needs of journalists at a time when systemic violence is on the rise by offering support in self-care, security, and other coping and protection measures.

Maxime Koami Domegni, a reporter originally from Togo but who now works from Senegal, has covered apparent political assassinations in the past, including that of former minister, journalist, and president of the Movement for National Development political party, Atsutsè Kokouvi Agbobli, who was discovered dead on a beach in August 2008. “Official reports indicated that he committed suicide by drowning, after escaping from a hospital,” says Domegni. “But there were many contradictions around his death. I wrote about this in 2019. We still had to be extremely cautious, and very few people would accept talking about it.” Agbobli’s son revealed to Domegni that his father was planning to run as a candidate in the next presidential election. “In a country where hundreds have been killed for political reasons, under the same regime, some stories are particularly sensitive. Even 10 years after the fact,” says Domegni.

Some 400 to 500 people were killed and thousands injured in Togo after the sudden death of its long-time president, Gnassingbé Eyadéma, in February 2005, and the subsequent disputed presidential elections in April. “Victims have filed complaints in court. But none of them have been investigated. Even the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Court of Justice condemned the Togolese state for denying

**“THE PRACTICE OF TAKING A STORY AND RUNNING WITH IT OVER TIME HAS GONE. WE NEED TO DOCUMENT THIS VIOLENCE IN A WAY THAT FORCES ACTION”**

**JULIAN RADEMEYER**  
DIRECTOR OF THE ORGANIZED CRIME OBSERVATORY FOR EAST AND SOUTHERN AFRICA, GI-TOC

**A** few days before last November’s municipal elections in South Africa, local politician Siyabonga Mkhize was murdered. He was gunned down as he went door-to-door talking to his constituents in the neighborhood of Cato Crest. He was with three other people, one of whom was also killed.

Mkhize, a ward councillor candidate with the African National Congress party, was elected posthumously to the Ward 101 seat. However, his murder resulted in a by-election for the ward, and Mzimuni “Mzi” Ngiba won the position, which he held between 2016 and 2021.

In May of this year, Ngiba was arrested for allegedly murdering Mkhize, the man he replaced. Three others were also arrested in connection with the death.

This murder plot was covered by the press while I was investigating another assassination in the area. That’s how common the phenomenon is becoming.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: OUPA MOKOENA/AFRICAN NEWS AGENCY/ANA

LEFT: FANI MAHUNTSI/GALLO IMAGES VIA GETTY IMAGES

**PREVIOUS SPREAD:**  
Vusi ‘Khekhe’ Mathibela stands in court for the murder of businessman Wandile Bozwana





**ABOVE: A mourner holds a sign that reads “not captured” following the murder of civil servant Babita Deokaran**

**RIGHT: Priscilla Mchunu was an acting principal when she was gunned down while teaching her high school history class in 2017**

the victims fair justice,” says Domegni, who argues that journalists should consider most of these deaths as assassinations: “Many of them have been targeted for being opposition activists and killed purposely.”

Families often don’t differentiate when their loved ones are killed in traditional hits or targeted mass killings. Journalists should cover both in their reporting, according to Domegni.

One way to keep journalists safe when reporting on assassinations, Domegni advises, is to report on the ground in the country you are covering and then do the production work and publishing outside the country. This gives the journalist some extra protection, but also helps to make sure the story itself can’t be quashed. Several Russian newsrooms, for example, have reconstituted themselves outside the country in the wake of President Vladimir Putin’s invasion of Ukraine and the criminalization of accurate reporting on the war. Domegni stresses that a pipeline is essential to extract journalists from their countries if necessary.

“Extraction is a very complicated process,” says Pereira. “First, the threat needs to be verified as genuine,” and an assessment carried out to determine if the individual can be relocated within the country or if a complete extraction is necessary. Will the family accompany them? Will it be permanent or temporary? “The question of funding the extraction and long-term support of the individual and family is crucial,” he says.

Domegni suggests creating a “shadow network” of journalists that would be willing to take over working on stories in case the original journalists are deported or worse. “I would opt for virtual shadowing because this will mean there is no physical surveillance possible,” says Ruona J. Meyer, chair of the board at Alibi Investigations, a non-profit investigative unit and training center in Johannesburg I founded that helps African journalists produce investigative podcasts, as well as an Emmy-nominated, multimedia investigative journalist and consultant originally from Nigeria. This would create a sense that even an assassination wouldn’t extinguish the story, and the coverage would endure regardless.

Indeed, organizations like Forbidden Stories, whose tagline is “Killing the journalist won’t kill the story,” already do this kind of work. Forbidden Stories completes and publishes the investigations of journalists who can no longer pursue their projects due to threats, imprisonment, or murder. After a journalist in danger submits their initial reporting, Forbidden Stories collaborates with both local and international media outlets to continue the journalist’s investigation. The goal, according to Forbidden Stories’ mission statement, is to show press freedom enemies that “even if you succeed in stopping a single messenger, you will not stop the message.”

Creating shadow networks of journalists takes “power away from those who harm or harass and deport journalists,” says Meyer. “It provides real protection for the journalist because they can even leave before they

are forced to. They know a shadow will take over. It is also about creating journalism practices that tangibly prioritize the people, rather than profit. Press freedom needs to adapt and be as tactical and relentless as its attackers.”

When done right, stories about assassination get to the people behind the murder — not just the person or people responsible for the actual killing. I did a podcast series over a year ago called “Too Many Enemies” that looked at the assassination of wealthy South African businessman Wandile Bozwana. A host of hitmen were arrested for the crime, and four were recently convicted of murder. But no arrest of “the mastermind” has been made.

In my reporting I have found disgruntled police officers to be the best source of information when looking for a mastermind. In South Africa, it is common practice for a police officer to be moved off a case when he or she gets too close to solving it, if higher ups don’t want a conclusion. This can leave the officer despondent and eager to talk, at least anonymously.

It’s also imperative to remember that the people who are feeding you information are taking a risk in talking with you — whether they are a source for a story about assassinations or a whistleblower on a major investigation. The Platform to Protect Whistleblowers in Africa, an organization that defends whistleblowers and deploys lawyers to help litigate on their behalf, argues that whistleblowers need a strong, independent media to counteract weak political systems. “But media has a tendency to fight for the story and not necessarily the whistleblower, whose person becomes the evidence they require,” says investigative journalist and PPLAAF board member Khadija Sharife. “If the media house is not careful, their electronic or physical paper trail could expose the whistleblower,” which could put them at risk of assassination.

South Africa has benefited hugely from whistleblowers coming forward in the last few years to expose government corruption. But with assassinations escalating — and becoming prominent in public spaces — protection is becoming more difficult to offer.

In early June 2022, two men walked into a fancy eatery in Johannesburg’s suburb of Rosebank, a neighborhood of glossy malls and high-rise apartments, and opened fire on a customer named Jason Lambe. The victim was a businessman who, according to police, was armed but had no time to reach for his gun as he sat waiting for a breakfast takeaway at 10:00 on a Thursday morning. One of the last major news reports on the killing was also back in June, when one of Lambe’s business associates came forward “looking for answers.” This assassination completely ruptures the idea in South Africa that crime can’t reach certain affluent areas.

However, the news cycle quickly moved on. As a journalist in a country with a rising assassination rate, you have to prioritize stories you have the resources to cover — and that resonate most strongly with your audience, though this is a bias that should be examined like any other.

News24, a large South African news site, has re-

mained focused on the assassination of civil servant Babita Deokaran, a corruption whistleblower who worked for the Gauteng Department of Health. Though she was assassinated in 2021, News24 has persisted in covering the case, releasing stories as recently as August 2022.

The first story revealed how Deokaran tried to stop almost \$6 million in suspicious payments and flagged nearly \$50 million in other suspicious transactions at the Gauteng Department of Health just days before she was killed. She even confided in colleagues that her investigating could result in her death.

While Deokaran suspected that her work could lead to her assassination, it isn’t always so obvious to the potential victim. Priscilla Mchunu was a 54-year-old acting principal when she was assassinated in 2017 in the surrounds of Pietermaritzburg, a city not far from Durban in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. She was gunned down while teaching her high school history class. An entire class of Laduma High students watched her being murdered, while she stood at the blackboard. Years later, no arrests have been made.

I investigated this case for the second series of our podcast Alibi and uncovered that Mchunu may have been the victim of a contract killing because of her appointment as acting principal, as this put her in a position to be next in line for the top job of principal. The case completely shattered me because it meant assassinations had infected every part of our society. Mchunu wasn’t a politician or conducting business deals; she was a high school teacher who had done nothing to warrant being a target.

This assassination also affected me because those involved — particularly the students who had witnessed the murder — were still suffering from the trauma. My story followed a father and son team from the community who had endeavored to solve the crime themselves. The father was a cop and would unofficially bring headshots home to his son, who had witnessed the murder, to examine. The son would point to the ones he thought looked like the assassins as they were spread out on the dining room table.

Beyond the quick newspaper article written when the murder happened, few journalists followed the story. The father and son thought that they were on their own and were grateful when I arrived. But there was a risk to me. I was trailed, warned, and told to leave town.

But these stories are so important, not just so justice can be served but so those who knew the victims can see them properly recognized. The power of journalism I have witnessed — through my assassination reporting — is that often the loved ones think that the world has forgotten and moved on to the next story. You have a chance to prove them wrong and show them that society — in some form — still cares. ■

**“IN A COUNTRY WHERE HUNDREDS HAVE BEEN KILLED FOR POLITICAL REASONS, UNDER THE SAME REGIME, SOME STORIES ARE PARTICULARLY SENSITIVE. EVEN 10 YEARS AFTER THE FACT”**  
**MAXIME KAOMI**  
**DOMENGI**  
**REPORTER IN SENEGAL**

LEFT: FANI MAHUNTSI/GALLO IMAGES VIA GETTY IMAGES; RIGHT: COURTESY OF ALIBI INVESTIGATIONS



# “TO TELL YOUR OWN STORY IS A BASIC HUMAN RIGHT”

**As more people are displaced from their home countries, newsrooms inside refugee camps are giving voice to these marginalized communities**

BY STEFANIA D'IGNOTI





# F

**OR ONE DAY** in March 2022, an unimposing container at the Ušivak refugee camp for migrants, about 14 miles from Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina, was transformed into a newsroom. Almost a dozen migrants sat in a circle, with no tools other than their notebooks and pens, taking notes on how to use the photo features on their phones to improve the quality of the images they produced.

Danyal Hozhabry, a 34-year-old migrant from Iran, was excited to practice his photography skills. “I used to work as a photographer assistant in a dark room when I was a child,” he told me as he unfolded a chair and set up a white board to prepare the classroom. “For the past year, the spark of photography lit up my heart again.”



Hozhabry is a member of Dispatches in Exile, an editorial project giving migrants and asylum-seekers transiting through Bosnia and Herzegovina on their way to the European Union a platform to tell their own stories. The project, which began in 2021, was launched as the Covid-19 pandemic was worsening an already dire situation for migrants in Bosnia. Headed by the VII Foundation, a nonprofit media education group, Dispatches has shed light on refugees’ everyday lives inside Bosnian camps, from what they’ve been eating to the entrepreneurial initiatives they’ve launched to engage with the outside world.

As more people are displaced from their home countries due to conflicts, persecution, poverty, and the climate crisis, media outlets have covered the news mainly through numbers and facts reported by journalists who visit refugee camps but have little personal connection to the issue itself. To bridge that gap, some newsrooms have attempted to include more reporters with immigrant backgrounds to report on refugees. Dispatches is one example of a newsroom established inside a refugee camp

— where the news is produced by migrants, for migrants.

“Representation is very important in the media sector. [Western] journalists reporting on refugee camps will not approach and reflect on the situation on the ground in the same way as reporters who are, or were, refugees themselves,” says Katrin Schatz, project manager at the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom, which works with journalists in exile in Europe. “Refugees being able to tell their own stories will help break down stereotypes, clichés, and prejudices in the media, and consequently in people’s minds.”

Some European countries, especially those ringing the Mediterranean Sea, have taken in hundreds of thousands of refugees since 2015 due to their proximity to Africa and the Middle East. This has sometimes resulted in hostilities from locals, which have at times escalated into clashes, and a rise in nationalist politics across the continent. In 2018, the far-right, xenophobic League party, headed by Matteo Salvini, came to power in Italy and introduced anti-migrant measures. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has called migrants “a

public security and terror risk” and is openly anti-immigrant, warning in July that Hungary must not become a “mixed-race” country. In 2021, Greece expanded a wall that was built a decade ago with the aim of stopping the wave of migrants attempting to cross into Europe.

More than a million people have transited through Greece and Italy since late 2014. Many of them have gone through the national asylum systems, which often entail long periods of waiting until an asylum application is approved. In the meantime, they are required to live with other asylum-seekers in the same reception centers where they will also attend school and language classes — sometimes amid local anti-migrant sentiments. In 2020, for example, violence erupted on Lesbos, a Greek island hosting thousands of asylum-seekers, where far-right vigilantes attacked humanitarian workers helping migrants.

## MIGRATORY BIRDS

**IN GREECE**, where refugee camps are located near big cities like Athens, it often seems difficult to reach Greek audiences and educate them about what happens

a few meters from their houses. Over the past five years, Migratory Birds — a refugee-run newspaper — has tried to do just that.

Migratory Birds was founded as a language improvement workshop led by the Network for Children’s Rights youth center, one of the many local NGOs working inside the Ritsona refugee camp, just outside the Greek capital. But it quickly turned into an opportunity to tackle misinformation about refugees in Greece. A group of 15 Afghan girls — fed up with the way asylum-seekers were depicted in mainstream European media — decided to turn the journalism workshop into an actual newspaper. Aside from writing about camp events, “the goal was to turn it into an outlet to communicate their fears and frustrations, but also their hopes and dreams,” explains Ioanna Papaioannou, a professional journalist and media trainer who used to work in documentary filmmaking.

The first issue was published in April 2017 and included stories on the situation in the camp, book reviews, and stories about staffers’ journeys to

**Pakistanis make their way to Croatia over the Plješevica mountain on the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina. Ziyah Gafić, a Bosnian photojournalist, was motivated to find a way to give refugees the opportunity to tell their stories**

**PREVIOUS SPREAD:** In August 2020, the rescue ship Sea-Watch 4 evacuated hundreds of refugees who attempted to cross the Mediterranean Sea

PREVIOUS SPREAD: HANNAH WALLACE-BOWMAN/MSE

ZIYAH GAFIĆ/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC





Europe. Today, the team includes two dozen reporters between the ages of 13 and 25 and publishes in five languages. Articles in each issue vary from reported features on Athens' best places to eat to essays about love, pieces about food and traditions in writers' home countries, and poetry. In 2020, Migratory Birds also launched a website to act as an archive of the print editions.

Mahdia Hossaini, an Afghan refugee born and raised in Iran and living in Athens since 2016, has been with the Migratory Birds team since its inception. "The news-

paper initially helped me to familiarize myself with the small community of the camp because, as a woman, it was very difficult to integrate into that specific [space]," Hossaini says. Many of the men in the camp did not support the idea of women being in charge of a news outlet because they felt it would distract them from more suitable activities for women. However, "we slowly left behind the closed space of the camp," Hossaini explains. "This project was a way to enter the local community. We were even invited [to speak at] many different schools and universities."

The first issue of Migratory Birds was integrated into a Greek newspaper — *Efimerida ton Sintakton* — as an 8-page insert. In total, around 13,000 copies are distributed bi-monthly across the country. "It's a unique experience for us Greeks," Papaioannou says. "Even people in small villages are exposed to the sight of foreign alphabets next to the Greek one and to images from migrants' lenses that they wouldn't otherwise see."

Despite the anti-migrant rhetoric from some in the country, the reception has so far mainly been positive, she adds. Readers have sent letters of support to

Migratory Birds, thanking the writers for contributing a different perspective to news about the camps and migrants. Migratory Birds hopes one day this will lead to political change, at least on the local level, as more people see the human stories behind the international crisis.

The team receives training from journalists from outlets like Reporters United, an organization that promotes investigative journalism in Greece, and *Efimerida*. They help with headline writing and digital publishing as well as audio editing for occasional

**Staffed only by refugees in Kakuma, Kenya's second largest refugee camp, Kanere's goal is to challenge the narrative aid agencies present to international journalists**

GIZ KENYA





**Inside Greece's Ritsona refugee camp, newsrooms have popped up to combat misinformation about migrants**

podcast episodes. Funding comes from groups like the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees and the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation. In September, Hossaini began an internship at Greek newspaper. Her hope for the future: a news outlet run solely by refugees with no Greek intermediaries.

### DISPATCHES IN EXILE

**ZIYAH GAFIĆ**, a Bosnian photojournalist and regional director of the VII Academy, the educational branch of the VII Foundation, was motivated to find a way to give refugees the opportunity to tell their stories from their own points of view. As a former refugee of the Yugoslavian war in the 1990s himself, he felt this

was necessary. The result is Dispatches in Exile, which gives voice to refugees along the Balkan Route for asylum-seekers trying to reach the E.U.

“All our knowledge [about refugees] is acquired through third persons — be it journalists, activists, or humanitarian workers. We almost never hear the voice of the direct subjects,” Gafić says. He believes that, whereas other movements like Black Lives Matter and #MeToo were able to finally bring forward the voices of the victims, space for refugees in the media has not been made. “It’s not just a matter of journalism,” he adds. “Being able to tell your own story is a basic human right.”

Since Dispatches was founded, VII Academy has

trained about 70 people scattered across reception centers around Bosnia and Herzegovina and has organized at least 10 professional workshops in its offices in Sarajevo to train participants on technical photography skills and narrative storytelling. Their work is financially supported by journalism grants provided by philanthropic entities, such as TED.

As a photographer, Gafić decided to focus on telling visual stories. “Photos and visuals are the most universal language,” he says. “Since people on the move come from way too many different places and often don’t speak English well enough to write, we thought photography was a more immediate tool to let them express themselves and for their audience to understand them.”

Since the majority of asylum seekers own a smartphone, Gafić had a good starting point to develop a newsroom.

“Our newsroom is very low-cost, and the professional training focuses on refining their skills to produce photos and videos, accompanied by a catchy text, to post on social media,” Gafić explains. “Even if the majority of participants in these projects will not become a professional journalist, the skill of knowing how to tell your own story has a significant psychological effect on [their] lives.”

As a social media-focused outlet (although stories are also shared on Dispatch’s website), one of the first assignments is to publish on Instagram about their daily meals. They write something about themselves as well as any personal story connected to the specific meal pictured in the post. Some documented the daily food they received from the United Nations agencies administering the transit camps to raise awareness of nutritional problems migrants face; others preferred to show how they cook for themselves and each other to replicate the flavors of home.

**“Refugees being able to tell their own stories will help break down stereotypes, clichés, and prejudices in the media, and consequently in people’s minds”**

**KATRIN SCHATZ, PROJECT MANAGER, EUROPEAN CENTRE FOR PRESS AND MEDIA FREEDOM**

From there, participants like Iranian photographer Hozhabry work on improving technical skills with a focus on creating a storytelling narrative to engage audiences. Ayanle, who is from Somalia and declined to give his last name for security reasons, traveled without family to Bosnia and decided to open up about the traumas he experienced along the way through a short video showing his current living conditions in the camp. Twenty-year-old Afghan twins Roseena and Melina Hafizi documented the clothes they designed during their three-month stay in the Ušivak transit camp to show how migrants are eager to contribute their professional and artistic skills to local communities.

When a fashion brand run by asylum-seekers in Ušivak was launched and had a runway show in Sarajevo, Hozhabry reported the story. He documented the whole process, from the brand’s inception to the sewing and design sessions to the gala night itself.

Hozhabry’s photos were picked up by local Bosnian newspapers. “But they misspelled my name, when giving me credits in the print edition,” Hozhabry says. “It made me feel without an identity. I think this would not have happened, there would have been more attention to this detail, if a migrant were in the newsroom. It might seem like an irrelevant detail to anyone else, but it made me realize how much we still need to achieve representation.”

To develop yet another perspective on migration, Gafić is hoping to bring Dispatches to the migrants’ countries



of origin, particularly Ukraine and Afghanistan, to document the beginnings of migrants' journeys. "It's fundamental to keep these projects alive, and reproduce them elsewhere, specifically in the places they come from," Gafić says. "It empowers them even before they start making their way to Western countries."

### MIGRANTES 2.0

**IN SOME CASES**, already established news outlets are setting aside spaces for migrant voices. In Sicily, Salvo Cona, managing director of the online newspaper *Il Solidale*, launched in 2016 a section in his local newspaper called *Migrantes 2.0* aimed at giving a platform to those seeking asylum in Italy. "The goal was to let them tell stories about their own lives and their experiences in the new community," Cona explains. "We wanted to be setting an example of a multi-ethnic newsroom that had the unique feature of having part of its staff speaking from inside the Italian asylum system."

Participants were scouted through a summer workshop to improve their Italian language skills. Some like



**“Humanitarian workers have been telling stories on our behalf ... We felt a moral obligation to tell the story of what is going on inside the camp, from our own perspective”**

**TOLOSSA ASRAT, LEAD EDITOR OF KANERE**

17-year-old Tanin from Bangladesh prefer to talk about their new life in Sicily and their plans to fully integrate once they receive their paperwork; others prefer to engage readers with stories about their home countries, such as 18-year-old Saher Bellil, who wrote an essay about the white beaches of his native Hammamet in Tunisia, or 20-year-old Dalia Ilunga, who described in detail a typical wedding ceremony in her native Congo. Cona provides journalism training, which includes interviewing and multimedia skills, as well as press freedom education. Italian teachers from the language school in the refugee centers provide the writing and editing support.

Abdollah Abdulrahman, a 20-year-old Libyan living in Italy since 2018, recently published a story for *Migrantes 2.0* about Marcelin Oumarou, a man from Cameroon living in the Tusa camp in Messina who was in a play organized by the local community. Abdulrahman says publishing this story gave him the motivation to keep writing about the struggles and successes of migrant journeys to Europe: "Being a journalist is my real dream. I don't like being a journalist because I like to write or because I want to be on TV. I like it because I want to help those who want to get their message out in the world."

### KANERE

**ALTHOUGH MIGRANT** newsrooms are just starting to emerge in Europe, in Africa — a continent that hosts an

estimated 30 million refugees — a similar initiative that has been running for decades has evolved into a prominent media outlet. *Kanere* began in 2008 as a school club inside the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya, which accommodates around 200,000 people from countries like South Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia. The outlet quickly turned into a watchdog platform to protect the rights of the residents.

Staffed only by refugees in Kakuma, *Kanere* covers every aspect of life in this city-like camp. With its six print editions per year and a digital platform launched in 2016, its goal is to hold aid agencies working inside the camp accountable and challenge the narrative they present to international journalists during press visits. The outlet also provides residents crucial information they might need to move around and be safe during their daily lives.

"Humanitarian workers have been telling stories on our behalf, but from their own perspective, targeting donors' money and giving a completely disconnected image of our everyday reality," says Tolossa Asrat, lead editor of *Kanere*, who's been living in Kakuma for the past 10 years. "We felt a moral obligation to tell the sto-

ry of what is going on inside the camp, from our own perspective."

Asrat had been a radio reporter at a local station in Ethiopia before migrating to Kenya. This background led him to volunteer as a trainer around six years ago. During that time, he has been able to break stories that had an impact on his fellow refugees.

Recently, his reporting shed light on the increasing suicide rates in Kakuma and the U.N.'s response to the camp's social health issues. "We report for our own security and protection, as refugees and journalists," Asrat says. "But we also hope to target policymakers as an audience. If they read us, it can help them make informed decisions that will lead to positive changes in our life."

The outlet is expanding its scope and reporting more regularly from outside the camp. After living in Kakuma for four years, Qaabata Boru resettled in Canada but continues to report for *Kanere* to give those living in the camp an outside perspective. One of his recent stories — which detailed how authorities in other countries handled the pandemic compared to Kakuma — helped residents realize how aid agencies

didn't implement basic public health measures to curb the spread of Covid-19, which motivated residents to peacefully demand more attention from humanitarian workers.

*Kanere* was among the first outlets to report on Kenya's decision in March to close Kakuma, and their work helped raise awareness of the future of the asylum-seekers living there. Despite the announcement of the closure, several of *Kanere's* former journalists living in Nairobi plan to keep *Kanere* going by reporting on the aftermath of its closure, namely through stories about asylum-seekers forced to upend their lives and international reporting by former colleagues now living as refugees in the West.

With Europe facing yet another refugee crisis with millions of Ukrainians fleeing the Russian invasion and with millions of people expected to be forced to flee their homes due to the climate crisis, efforts to understand the lives of people displaced by unstable regimes, famine, and natural disasters are increasingly essential. "If we neglect refugee voices in the media, there'll be no room for improvement of mainstream coverage of migration," Gafić says. ■

**A member of Migratory Birds' team interviews UNHCR's representative in Greece, Maria Clara Martin. Migratory Birds hopes its stories will lead to political change as more people see the human stories behind the international crisis**

PREVIOUS PAGE: THODORIS NIKOLAOU/SOLOMON

COURTESY OF MIGRATORY BIRDS



## NIEMAN NOTES

### 1977

**Hennie van Deventer** has received a distinguished alumnus award from the Hoër Volksskool in Potchefstroom, South Africa, 65 years after leaving the school. The honor recognizes his exceptional work in the community.

### 1981

**Peter Almond** is author of the e-book “From Across the Pond: A Love Letter to Cleveland: The Memoirs of a Brit Journalist with The Cleveland Press 1970-82.” In it he recalls his work for the paper in northeast Ohio during the 1970s and early 1980s until the Press closed in 1982.

### 1982

**Anita Harris** is author of “The View From Third Street,” a memoir that recounts her experiences co-founding the Harrisburg Independent Press (HIP), a weekly alternative newspaper. HIP began in conjunction with the 1972 trial of the Harrisburg Seven, in which anti-war nuns and priests were accused of conspiring to kidnap National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger and blow up underground heating tunnels in Washington, D.C.

### 1985

**Bernard Edinger** died in Paris on June 25, 2022. A French national, Edinger grew up in the United States in the 1950s and attended the French Lycée in New York. He joined Reuters in 1969 and reported from nearly 50 countries on four continents. During his 32-year career with the news agency, he worked from London, Paris, Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and Nairobi. The many stories he covered included the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, the 1975 fall of Saigon, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, and coups and droughts in Africa. In 2004, Edinger was named Chevalier (Knight) of the Légion d’Honneur, the highest French distinction for military and civil accomplishments.

### 1995

**George Abraham**, founder and publisher of New Canadian Media (NCM), accepted the Canadian Journalism Foundation’s CJF-Meta Journalism Project Digital News Innovation Award on behalf of his news organization in June. The award recognizes innovations in digital media that have a

demonstrated impact in advancing the quality of digital journalism.

### 1998

**Phillip W.d. Martin**, a senior investigative reporter for the GBH News Center for Investigative Reporting, is a Fall 2022 Joan Shorenstein Fellow at Harvard Kennedy School. He is working on a four-month research project addressing “Media Myths and False Balance in the Coverage of Antifa and The Black Lives Matter Movement.” The fellowship builds on Martin’s reporting about the rise of extremist activity in New England in recent years.

### 2000

**Jerry Zremski** is head of a new local news initiative at The University of Maryland’s Philip Merrill College of Journalism. The program will strengthen local newsrooms and increase collaboration among news organizations in Maryland, while providing students with experience in local news reporting. Zremski has been the Washington bureau chief for The Buffalo News since 2007 and will continue as a part-time enterprise reporter for the paper.

### 2004

**Susan Orlean**, author a staff writer for The New Yorker, is host of “Book Exploder,” a new eight-part podcast series in which she interviews writers about how they do what they do. The series was created by executive producer Hrishikesh Hirway, who started and hosts the sister podcast “Song Exploder.”

### 2008

**Jenifer McKim**, and her colleague **Philip W.d. Martin, NF ’98**, and Paul Singer, won a national Edward R. Murrow Award for Excellence in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion for their WGBH series “Unseen: The Boy Victims of the Sex Trade.” The series also won a Salute to Excellence Award from the National Association of Black Journalists. McKim recently started a new position as deputy investigative editor at the GBH News Center for Investigative Reporting.

### 2009

**Graciela Mochkofsky** is the new dean of the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at the City University of New York (CUNY). A native of Argentina, she is the only Latina serving as dean at a

graduate school of journalism in the U.S. Mochkofsky joined the Newmark J-School in 2016 and launched the nation’s first bilingual master’s journalism program in English and Spanish. She later became executive director of the Center for Community Media (CCM), which supports news outlets covering immigrants and communities of color across the country.

### 2013

**Finbarr O’Reilly**, laureate of the 11th Carmignac Photojournalism Award dedicated to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), has published “Congo, A Sublime Struggle.” The book “examines themes central to security and human rights in eastern Congo while exploring links to the environment and climate crisis, the country’s colonial history, and how ongoing exploitation by extractive industries affects the lives of Congolese.” The book also includes a photo report made in collaboration with the International Criminal Court (ICC) for the series “Life after Conflict,” which features the stories of war crimes survivors.

**Laura Wides-Muñoz** has joined NBC News as the senior tech investigations editor in the organization’s business, technology, and innovation unit. Previously, she served as deputy Washington bureau chief for the Los Angeles Times and executive editor for news practices at ABC News in Washington, D.C.

### 2016

**Anastasia Taylor-Lind** is author of “One Language,” her debut poetry collection. Her poems draw on her firsthand experience of war in the Donbas region of Ukraine and explore how damage is generated and perpetuated.

### 2018

**Emily Dreyfuss**, senior editor of the Technology and Social Change Project at the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy, is co-author with Joan Donovan and Brian Friedberg of “Meme Wars: The Untold Story of the Online Battles Upending Democracy in America.” The new book by the three Harvard Kennedy School researchers how far-right operatives wage wars against mainstream America.

**Sipho Kings** editorial director of the weekly African newspaper The Continent, and **Amber Payne, NF ’21**, co-editor

## Tim Giago, NF ’91, champion for Native American news coverage, dies at 88

### The trailblazing journalist worked tirelessly to support a free press in Indigenous communities

**T**im Giago, an Oglala Lakota journalist, newspaper pioneer, and 1991 Nieman Fellow, died in Rapid City, South Dakota, on July 24, 2022, at the age of 88.

In 1981, Giago founded the Lakota Times (later renamed Indian Country Today), the first independently owned Native American weekly in the United States. He later founded other newspapers including the Lakota Journal and the Native Sun News.

Giago helped launch the Native American Press Association (now called the Native American Journalists Association or NAJA) in 1983 and served as the group’s first president. In 1994, he was selected for the South Dakota Hall of Fame, and in 2007, he became the first Native American to be inducted into the South Dakota Newspaper Hall of Fame. His other honors include the 1985 H. L. Mencken Award for editorial writing and the 2017 NAJA-Medill Milestone Achievement Award for his lifetime of service to journalism and dedication to NAJA.

Throughout his career, he mentored and trained other Native journalists and worked tirelessly to promote and support a free press in Indigenous communities.

-in-chief of The Emancipator, have been selected as members of the 2023 Executive Program in News Innovation and Leadership at the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism. The program runs from September 2022 to June 2023.

### 2019

**Sevgil Musaieva**, editor-in-chief of Ukraine’s leading independent online newspaper Ukrainska Pravda, has been selected for a 2022 International Press Freedom Award by the Committee to Protect Journalists. As CPJ notes in



As a boy, he attended the Holy Rosary Indian Mission School (now named the Red Cloud Indian School) on the Pine Ridge Reservation, where he was born and raised. He wrote about his experiences in his book “Children Left Behind: The Dark Legacy of Indian Mission Boarding Schools,” which tells the story of the widespread abuse suffered by the children in the schools run by the Catholic Church and the attempted destruction of Lakota culture, religion and traditions. The book was illustrated by his daughter Denise Giago.

In 1952, Giago joined the Navy and went to college on the GI Bill, attending the University of Nevada, Reno. Reflecting on his life and career, he explained that he received his Lakota name, Nanwica Kciji — He Stands Up for Them — in an inipi (sweat lodge) ceremony celebrating his safe return from service in Korea.

His weekly column, “Notes from Indian Country,” was syndicated by Knight Ridder

and appeared in newspapers across the U.S.

In 2005, Giago wrote in Nieman Reports about freedom of the press in Indian Country and what drove him to start The Lakota Times: “While working as a reporter for The Rapid City Journal, I was bothered by the fact that although I had been born and raised on the nearby Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, I was seldom given the opportunity to do news stories about the people of that reservation. One editor told me he believed that since I was Native American, I would not be able to be objective in my reporting. I replied, ‘All of your other reporters are white. Are they objective when covering the white community?’”

He told Nieman Reports that his proudest accomplishment was bringing more Native Americans into journalism: “My lasting legacy would be the dozens of young Indian journalists I sent out into the mainstream media in both newspapers and radio.” ■

its announcement: “Under Musaieva’s leadership, Ukrainska Pravda journalists are providing critical, reliable coverage despite the dangers of war and Russia’s declared ban on the publication.”

### 2021

**Joe Bernstein** has joined the Style section of The New York Times as a reporter. He is covering how tech is changing the way Americans see themselves and each other, and the convergence of that sector with culture, politics, and the media.

**Sarah Glover** is the new vice president

for news and civic dialogue at WHYY in Philadelphia. She is in charge of newsgathering operations for radio, television, and digital media and leads civic engagement efforts throughout Pennsylvania, Delaware, and South Jersey. She joined WHYY from Minnesota Public Radio’s MPR News, where she was managing editor.

**Bethany Mollenkoff** was a finalist for the Scripps Howard Foundation’s Excellence in Visual Journalism Award for her work on STAT’s “Distanced: Pandemic Stories of Black Life in the Rural South.” ■



## Upending the Entrenched Power Dynamics in Journalism

Going beyond surface level diversity talk requires changing how we educate young journalists

BY PACINTHE MATTAR

**I** am at home everywhere, and nowhere. I am never a stranger and I never quite belong.”

That quote hung above my 10th grade English teacher’s desk.

I felt like it was describing my entire life. I had spent my whole childhood on the move — going from Egypt to Toronto to Saudi Arabia and then to high school in the U.A.E.

The “at home everywhere and nowhere” theme is a large part of what pushed me toward journalism.

As an Egyptian-Canadian, Muslim, Arabic-, English- and French-speaking girl, I knew that the media often had not done right by many of my communities. I felt I could rectify that by being a journalist. I didn’t realize how heavy that weight would be — and the barriers I’d run into.

For 10 years, I was a journalist at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. I worked on a national, award-winning daily radio show called *The Current*, which had 2.5 million listeners a week. I was fueled to put people on this show that had never been on. I used to keep a list of all the new voices that I pitched and produced.

I rose to the rank of producer, often filling in as senior producer. But when I applied for the role formally, I was told I needed more training. I was qualified to lead temporarily, but not fully.

Every day was like walking a tightrope, especially when discussing stories about race, racism, and police brutality. Often, the room fell silent, and people stopped meeting my eyes. There were many times I felt I had to prove racism existed in the context of stories I brought forward.



**Writing the hard truths about journalism opened the door for me to be part of shaping its future**



To many people, my presence was a check mark for diversity. But being the only one in the room often came with pushing back on editorial decisions deeply rooted in entrenched power dynamics.

The first time I distinctly remember pushing back on an editorial decision was in 2015 after Freddie Gray’s death. I was in Baltimore, heading home, when a young man stopped to talk to me. I asked him his name (it was Lonnie Moore), turned on my mic, and asked him: How many Freddie Grays are there in this neighborhood?

Lonnie described what life as a young Black man was like — from being called the n-word, being stopped for no apparent reason by police, and the heartbreak of watching injustices toward Black people repeatedly.

As our conversation started, another young man joined us. I asked him his name and spelled it out loud to make sure I got it right: “J-A-R-E-,” I said.

“No,” he said. “J-A-R-R-O-D. Jones.”

What followed was a 45-minute duet in which these two strangers were completing each other’s sentences, mirroring each

other’s accounts of being harassed by police for being Black.

I wanted to air the powerful conversation between Lonnie and Jarrod. But my executive producer questioned if the men had given me their real names — implying that she didn’t believe what they described and didn’t trust that they were who they said they were. I told her that Jarrod corrected the spelling of his name.

She also questioned if I had called Baltimore Police for comment. I had — I called the police union, too — but no one responded. She said the piece wouldn’t run. An older white male colleague intervened on my behalf, talking with the executive producer who eventually let the interview air.

During my time at CBC, many other journalists and I fought thousands of small, daily battles like that one. I eventually left CBC and later found out I hadn’t been promoted because a manager saw me as “biased.”

A year later, George Floyd’s murder would launch a new civil rights movement and unleash a public reckoning about anti-Black racism in every industry, including journalism. I poured my long-boiling frustration into an essay for *The Walrus*, “Objectivity Is a Privilege Afforded to White Journalists.” It was a critique of objectivity and how falling outside of its accepted “lines” was especially punishing for Black, Indigenous, and other racialized journalists. I was terrified it would cost me my future in the industry.

After my piece was published in August 2020, it went viral and earned a gold medal at the National Magazine Awards. I spent my Nieman fellowship exploring ways to go beyond surface level diversity talk and create newsrooms with Black, Indigenous, and racialized people in upper echelons of power.

My Nieman year gave me the confidence to continue this work, which begins with how we teach journalism. I spent the summer teaching journalism to high school students at Boston University’s Summer Journalism Academy, where we had conversations about objectivity and fair sourcing.

Writing the hard truths about journalism opened the door for me to be part of shaping its future by educating the next generation of journalists. It’s one of the best ways to make sure that our industry can keep producing the kind of journalism that will bend us towards a more just future. ■

COURTESY OF YAMRI TADDESE



### AFTERIMAGE

## A Symbol of Hatred

BY JIM URQUHART

**I** had heard that white nationalists were going to make their presence known at the Pride celebration in Coeur D’Alene, Idaho. But when I found out that other far-right groups were staying away from the event because of the optics, I knew the rumors were true.

For a couple months, my colleagues and I had been monitoring the rhetoric coming from far-right groups as the LGBTQ+ community was preparing for the celebration. But to us, it was clear that many of the new residents that moved in recent years to northern Idaho were not interested in tolerance. It is a new element of white nationalism trying to reignite prejudiced beliefs and carve out a space for themselves through intimidation.

What was supposed to be a small gathering of the LGBTQ+ folks now felt like an act of resistance in the face of intimidation. Semi-automatic rifles were

slung on the shoulders of many of those opposed to the celebration. Rifles and other firearms are typical for the region. But what struck me was the skull face siege mask — a symbol of intimidation used by white nationalists and often meant to communicate the person wearing it is not interested in dialogue but would rather resort to violence — being worn in a public space. When I spoke to the man later it became clear he wasn’t wearing it because he was in any particular group but rather he held these beliefs without the reinforcement of others, underscoring that this symbolism has permeated beyond the white nationalists groups being tracked by law enforcement.

It was jarring compared to the approaches other white nationalist groups often take. Patriot Front, which holds flash mobs and turns away at the first sign of confrontation, typically doesn’t use the

siege mask because of its overt reference to violence. Many white nationalists don’t actually admit it in public because of the ramifications for their jobs and families. To them, it’s easier to use talking points that seem benign but underpin the belief that their “heritage” and “culture” are under threat.

Later in the day I made images of Patriot Front members getting arrested after being hauled out of the back of a U-Haul truck. Those images were shared the most as news of the day broke, but the picture of the man in the mask was different for me. This was a man who self-identified as a white nationalist and felt free to communicate that he was there with the sole purpose to intimidate the Pride celebration attendees. He didn’t have to use any words. In one frame, I was able to illustrate his threatening beliefs and the potential for violence in that moment. ■





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TO PROMOTE AND  
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**“IF [YOU] BELIEVE  
THAT IT’S TRUE THAT IN  
A DEMOCRACY, CITIZENS ARE  
THE MOST IMPORTANT ACTORS,  
THEN THE COVERAGE SHOULD  
BE CITIZEN-FOCUSED”**

JENNIFER BRANDEL