

NIEMAN REPORTS

# Nieman



**WITH DOZENS DEAD AND MORE  
WOUNDED, JOURNALISTS IN GAZA  
HAVE FACED THE DEADLIEST  
SIX MONTHS EVER RECORDED**

# **'UNPARALLELED AND UNPRECEDENTED'**

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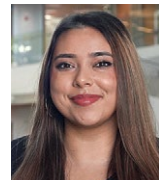


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Doaa Albaz, a journalist who works with the Anadolu Agency, walks through rubble while reporting on the aftermath of Israeli airstrikes.

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**Journalism needs a new leadership blueprint that allows managers the flexibility to confront the challenges facing the industry.**

## ‘Social Media is a Crime Scene’

Joan Donovan on the chaos of disinformation and how to navigate a “splintered” reality online

As one of the world’s leading experts on media manipulation and disinformation, Joan Donovan studies the darker side of the internet — online threats, conspiracy theories, extremist rhetoric, to name just a few examples. Donovan is an assistant professor of Journalism and Emerging Media Studies in the College of Communications at Boston University. Her book, “Meme Wars: The Untold Story of Online Battles Upending Democracy in America,” co-written with Emily Dreyfuss and Brian Friedberg, examines how the far right has pushed conspiracy theories into mainstream American discourse.

Donovan spoke to Nieman Fellows in October 2023 about journalism’s role in combatting disinformation, navigating today’s unmoderated and hyper-polarized internet, and how media outlets can adapt to our current digital age. Edited excerpts:

### On polarization and the nature of viral misinformation

What’s happening online seems to be wildly divergent from what it is that you’re experiencing in your own communities. Things seem to be more and more polarized. I’ll tell you, nobody goes on Instagram and posts a mediocre bowl of spaghetti. You’re either posting the best spaghetti you’ve ever had, or you’re not posting spaghetti at all.

Social media, sometimes just by its own design, will pull us in directions and towards things that are at the very fringes of ideas because they’re novel or they’re outrageous, which tend to be the characteristic of information that goes viral online.

There was a big study at MIT about when falsehoods go viral on Twitter. Overwhelmingly, they had the characteristic of being novel. That means only one person is saying something outrageous. We saw this during the pandemic over and over and over and over again.

Alex Jones had all of the novel and outrageous information. He was very good at it. I don’t know who his sources were,

but he was very deep in it. He seemed to know everything or he was making it up. I don’t know.

Jury’s still out on that. It might cost him \$2 billion, but we’ll see.

### On cyberattacks, cyber troops, and manipulating public sentiment

According to a study by the Oxford Internet Institute on cyber troops in 2020, cyber troops are government or political party actors tasked with manipulating public opinion online. Eighty-one countries use cyber troops, which is different from hacking or other forms of cyber warfare to directly attack opponents or infrastructure.

Cyber troops use social media and the internet as it’s designed while employing social engineering techniques like impersonation, bots, and what we might call growth hacking. They spend millions on online advertising. Disinformation is incredibly profitable for platform companies. The less money they can spend on content moderation, the more money they’re going to make in advertising.

This report also noted that Iran attacked Palestine on Facebook and Israel on Twitter in 2020. What we know from intelligence happening over the last couple of days, Iran has a very particular stake in the outcome of this war.

[I’m] not surprised to find evidence that they had been attacking both Palestine and Israel in the past. Their choice of platform matters in the sense of, which platforms are currently blocked in certain areas, which kinds of audiences are they trying to persuade? They might be attacking Palestine, but for the purpose of manipulating U.S. sentiment.

Craig Silverman wrote a great report for ProPublica in 2022 about fact checks being weaponized by Russia at the beginning of the war in Ukraine.

Manipulated videos, trolling and brigading, evidence collages — that is all different kinds of media put together to convince you of a thing. Hijacked accounts,

and then what we might call hollow sourcing, which is uncorroborated and anonymous sourcing — all of these things are playing out online. It’s really hard to know the difference between who is a cyber troop, who’s someone that’s shit posting, who’s someone that’s really there and really traumatized because it’s all happening in the same place, on the same networks.

### On holding power to account in the modern age of information wars

I agree that you have to hold people in power to account, but I also try to measure that with [the question], “What are they trying to convey?” If what they’re trying to convey is false, absolutely false, that nobody’s even dying and [the Israeli government] is saying there are babies being beheaded, then [we need] more than an intervention, more than a fact check. You’ve got to write a whole article about that.

That is something that in our reporting, you can take a step back from and say, “OK, well, what are the leaders trying to convey here? What are those positions? How do we in our reporting not get emotionally involved and also tell the truth?” The truth is that war is hell. We know this. Any death is a tragedy.

As journalists though, you do have to hold people in power to account, especially in this moment where there’s a broad failure of the U.S. government overall.

At the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville in August of 2017, you had a bunch of neo-Nazis show up. One of them drove his car into a crowd, killed a woman. Online though, the energy was all about, “We did it, we got the media to cover us. People are talking about the alt right now.” Violence can very often spur media attention.

We talk about strategic silence in the case of, “Well, a moment like that happens, don’t go interview the head neo-Nazi, interview the victims, interview people who are suffering in silence.” Pivot your reporting to be about the people whose message of community needs to be heard.

Then the next week, those idiots came to Boston and 40,000 people showed up and there was a bit of a skirmish but the Nazis left town very quickly. Media does mobilize and the way you frame the stories matter for how your audience and how the general public is going to react.

### On AI helping reporters combat misinformation and disinformation

I can’t tell you what [AI] is, but I can tell you



PAT GREENHOSE/THE BOSTON GLOBE VIA GETTY IMAGES

what it’s not, which is essentially a reporter. Truth needs an advocate, but truth is a human process. We don’t arrive at the truth because we stumble upon it, we don’t arrive at the truth by collating words and then predicting what the next word is going to be. That’s how AI makes sentences. It makes sentences that are common sentences, because it tries to predict things based on commonality.

What can AI help you do? It can help you write a letter of resignation, I’ll tell you that much.

It can help you with menial tasks like that. I got to write another recommendation letter for another person? “So and so is such a great blah, blah, blah.”

My hope for AI is that it does what the internet could have done in the beginning, which has become this vastly decentralized web of local sites.

I’m hoping that AI can help us distribute and build search engines that allow us to bring timely, accurate local knowledge to the forefront.

How might that look? It might be an AI bot that scans Facebook groups by location and pulls out different nuggets of information that might be worth interviewing someone about that says, “I went to city council last night, and so and

so said this. They’re going to build a mall where there used to be a different mall.”

AI could help us localize information and localized search so that we don’t just get national stories and national news. It’s such a feeble technology. It’s so flimsy that I have been told by people that work with AI in their newsrooms and in other places, they spend more time correcting what comes out of it than they do getting gainful upswing.

### On the future of legacy media

Institutions are like baseball teams. They have good years, they have bad years. They have good management years, they have bad management years. They live and die by that praxis.

Institutional longevity is not guaranteed. Money can’t buy you out of certain kinds of conflict, as Kanye West has figured out. What are the major conflicts that you can’t really buy yourself out of? We don’t know yet. When it comes to legacy media organizations, they’re really failing to adapt.

Even Fox News missed the boat when OAN and Right Side Broadcasting and other online quasi cable came in, because what those news organizations do is they say, “No one on Earth is listening to us. We’re so all on our own here. We need you as the audience to publish us and to distribute

our stuff. We’re the victims of mainstream media.”

What do people do? They go and they engage online and they distribute that stuff. Fox News lost that stranglehold that they had because they didn’t tow the line in 2020 when they needed to. It’s almost like, for a second, they forgot their identity and really thought they were news, and now they’re back to their old shenanigans.

The funny thing is, legacy media hates social media and they hate that journalists use social media. They want all of their journalists to just shut up and stop posting online. It’s to their detriment to not allow their journalists to engage on social media in the way that they could be.

I sometimes see the best reporters get burned out trying to change the culture at really prestigious newsrooms. I don’t know how many times I’ve talked to someone that’s come out of The New York Times just feeling bruised, battered, and burned out.

I always hold out hope that people will become smarter than their oppressor. You have to do that as a matter of survival. Information is survival in many ways. It’s how we bring generations together. It’s how we remember our past. It’s how we avoid the mistakes of our ancestors. It’s how we create remembrance. ■

## The History of the AR-15

Cameron McWhirter, NF '07, on the reporting behind the book “American Gun”

Zusha Elinson and I are reporters for The Wall Street Journal. He works out of San Francisco; I work out of Atlanta. We’ve covered a lot of mass shootings — horrific events that have been traumatizing American society with sickening regularity for years now. Everyone knows the places: Sandy Hook, San Bernardino, Las Vegas, Parkland, Dayton, Highland Park, Buffalo, Uvalde ... on and on. Zusha and I found ourselves calling and texting each other after yet another shooting, “Was it an AR-15?” The answer was often yes.

In 2018, we published a page-one story about how gun companies had become reliant on AR-15 sales for profits, and how

sales had spiked reliably in previous years after mass shootings.

But as we dove into that story, we found ourselves over-reporting — a reflexive habit among many journalists. We became

“**After much heartache, you develop a compulsion to provide the public a clear and thorough understanding of how our country got to this place.**”

fascinated with the saga of the gun, from its Cold War origins in the 1950s to its importance in our society today as the most popular — and most despised — rifle in America.

The tale starts with the self-taught, soft-spoken inventor, Eugene Stoner, who wanted to create a rifle for the U.S. military and its allies to combat the spread of communism. The gun was named the AR-15 because it was the 15th weapon developed by ArmaLite, the small-arms developer where Stoner worked.

The saga includes the rifle’s convoluted adoption by the military involving bureaucratic intrigue, spies, and an Air Force general shooting watermelons. The military renamed its version the M16 for “model 16” and ramped up production as U.S. involvement in Vietnam increased. Notorious malfunctions of the rifle, caused by changes ordered by a Pentagon committee, caused troops to die in combat. The military tried to cover up the tragedy.

A semiautomatic version of Stoner’s rifle was sold to civilians but was unpopular for decades. However,

extraordinary political battles in the 1990s helped propel AR-15 sales, and large gun makers in the 2000s marketed the rifle by appealing to buyers’ masculinity. A link developed between skyrocketing sales of the rifle and its increased use in mass shootings.

The AR-15 has become the leading symbol of our nation’s gun debate. Gun-rights advocates put its image on shirts, flags, bumper stickers, and even a brand of coffee. Gun-control advocates carry signs with an image of an AR-15 with a line through it. Its unique silhouette has become the focus of our never-ending argument about the role of firearms in our society.

Most AR-15 owners are responsible. A small number of people, however, bought their AR-15s to go to war with society through mass shootings. The same design innovations that were developed by the inventor in the 1950s to make the gun light and easy to shoot rapidly for soldiers in combat also made it easy for disturbed people — almost all of them young men with little prior knowledge of firearms — to wreak havoc everywhere people gather: schools, movie theaters, concerts, grocery stores, parades.

Covering these mass shootings is haunting. Journalists arrive to cover a tragedy and do their best, but after several days the reporters move on to the next story. After much heartache, you develop a compulsion to provide the public a clear and thorough understanding of how our country got to this place.

Zusha and I wanted to tell one important part of why these shootings were happening. We set out in 2019 to research and write “American Gun: The True Story of the AR-15.”

Over several years, we read thousands of documents at national archives, presidential libraries, universities, and research centers. We interviewed family and friends of the inventor, veterans, politicians, legislative advisors, lawyers, shooters, and, most importantly, victims of mass shootings. The result is a book about war, politics, invention, technology, society, and trauma — it’s American history for the last six decades told through a single object: the AR-15.

The result — the first social history of this gun and its impact on our country — was harder than writing a single news story. The goal, however, was the same: to give readers a deeper understanding of this complicated world and its challenges. ■



Students read at Good Beginnings child care center in Maple Heights, Ohio.

## Spotlighting Underserved Communities

Olivera Perkins, NF '08, is redefining the economics beat at Signal Cleveland

Chillingly high inflation was still in effect when Signal Cleveland, a nonprofit news organization, went online in late 2022.

As the economics reporter, it was a given I would cover the issue. But I didn’t want to cover it as legacy media had covered it. They focused on such things as vacations turning into staycations, Northeast Ohio residents driving less to cope with high gas prices, and people putting off buying homes until mortgage interest rates fell.

I wanted to write about how high inflation was affecting the multitude of low-income and working-class Greater Clevelanders who couldn’t relate to downgrading to staycations. They hadn’t been on vacation in years because they couldn’t afford one. The high price of gas was irrelevant because they couldn’t afford a car. High mortgage rates didn’t resonate for those who struggled to pay rent.

I’ve never had to fight with Signal Cleveland’s editors to do stories like these, as I had to when I had worked at the local daily. Signal Cleveland’s mission includes covering historically underserved communities. When legacy media covers something in an inner-city neighborhood, it is usually crime related.

Since the site launched, I’ve been able to cover staff shortages among childcare facilities, unionization efforts, and how a grassroots, nonprofit organization in Cleveland is meeting the needs of low-income residents through its storefront operation. I have also done in-depth coverage of the closing of a mobile home park, which forced more than 100 low-income and working-class families to find a new place to live in a tight housing market. Most media outlets focused on news conferences held by advocacy groups. I frequently visited the mobile home park and got to know many of the residents and the issues they face.

It’s great working for a nonprofit newsroom that is attempting to transform the local media landscape. People often speak of news deserts in terms of a dearth of media outlets. My definition also includes how legacy newsrooms often systematically write off certain communities or fail to cover them fully. My Signal Cleveland colleagues and I have covered communities, institutions, and issues that other media have consistently ignored. If we didn’t cover the complexity of life in such neighborhoods, it’s doubtful others would. And, in our short existence, we have seen how legacy news outlets have often followed our coverage — a welcome development.

I, like many others, believe that nonprofit newsrooms represent the best future for local news. However, I don’t see it as a future that aims to recreate the media landscape that existed before mass layoffs decimated daily newspapers throughout the country. The new focus should be on better connecting newsrooms to the communities they serve. ■



Chris Waltz launched AR-15 Gun Owners of America on Facebook. The book “American Gun” details the history of the AR-15, which has been used in multiple mass shootings across the country.

COURTESY OF DUSTIN CHAMBERS

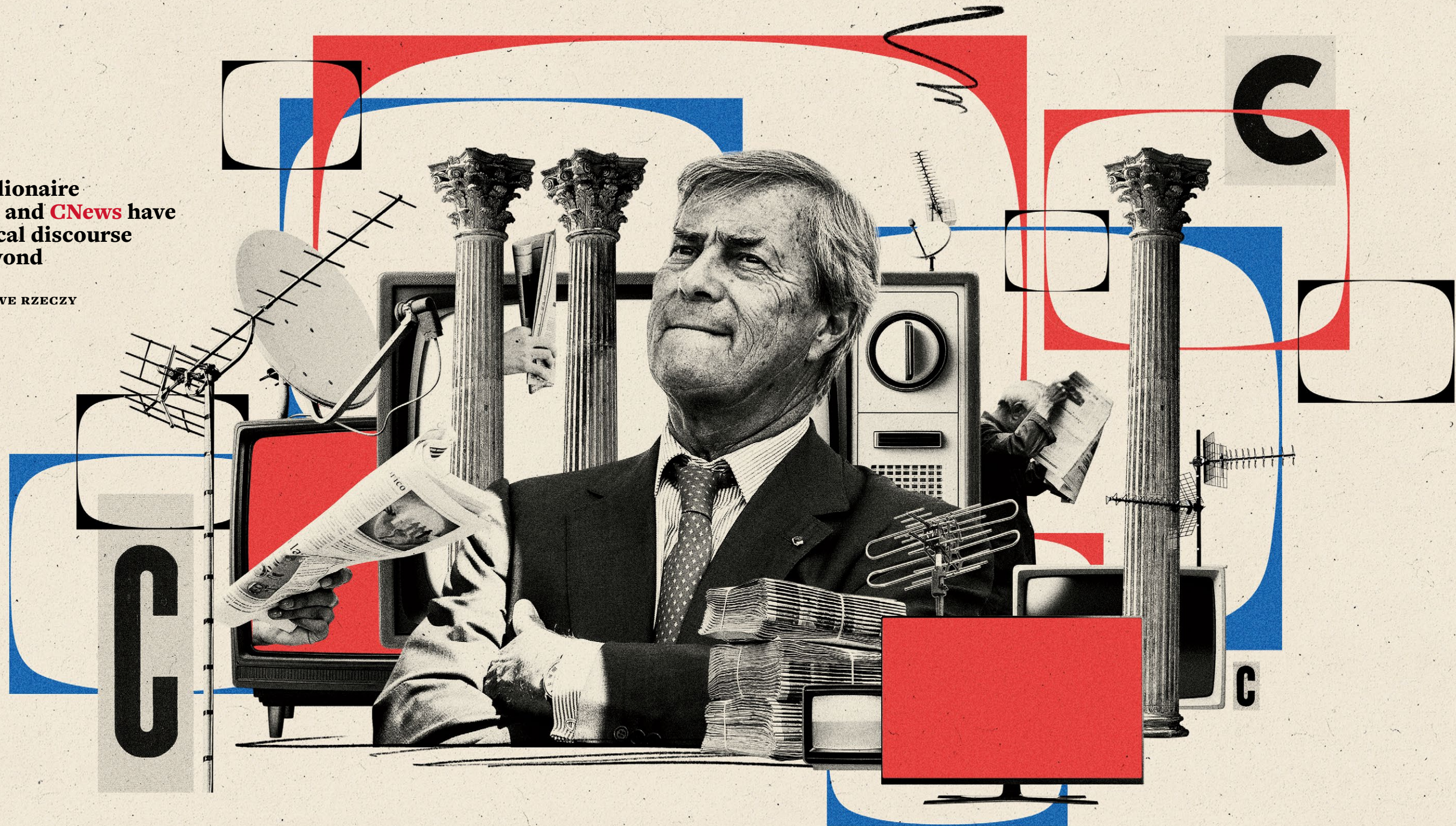
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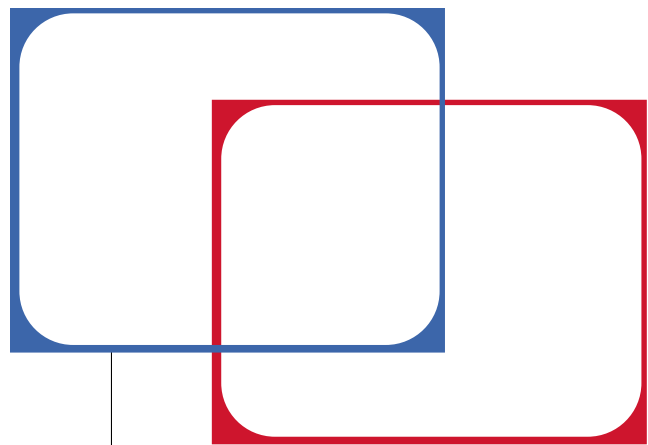
# THE FOX NEWS OF FRANCE

How French billionaire  
**Vincent Bolloré** and **CNews** have  
reshaped political discourse  
in Paris and beyond

BY VALENTINE FAURE

ILLUSTRATION BY KLAWA RZECZY





**O**N FEB. 17, 2022, French billionaire Vincent Bolloré officially retired as chairman of his family’s business after more than 40 years leading the company. The event took place in the family stronghold, in a small village on the Western coast of France, and marked the ceremonial handover of power from Vincent to two of his sons, Yannick and Cyrille. To the sound of bagpipes, they attended a mass celebrating the 200th anniversary of the family business, dressed in traditional Breton costumes for the occasion. As they left the chapel, a handful of demonstrators brandishing “Stop Bolloré” placards reminded participants of the controversy surrounding the group’s activities.

It was here in Brittany that the Bolloré empire was born. What began as paper company in 1822 eventually grew into a sprawling conglomerate that has included forays into the banking, energy, and logistics sectors. Much of the scrutiny, however, has centered around the Bolloré Group’s acquisition and handling of media outlets like CNews, a television channel where on-air personalities routinely make derogatory statements about migrants and have called on Muslims to renounce their faith. The station has also been intensely criticized for what media advocates and scholars say is its role in mainstreaming far-right ideas about immigrants overtaking the French population.

Vincent Bolloré, who took over the company in 1981, pieced together a tangled mix of media properties often

using the same acquisition strategy. His *modus operandi*, now taught in business schools across France, consists of taking very small stakes in companies and increasing them until a stock market raid is triggered, enabling him to be the largest shareholder. It’s a method that is both effective and controversial. This is how he came to control the TV station Canal+, magazine company Prisma Media, the radio station Europe 1, the print weekly Paris Match, and Le Journal du Dimanche, the only standalone Sunday newspaper in France. Under Bolloré’s control, each of these outlets has been subjected to the same methods of cost-cutting, programming changes, layoffs, and editorial pivots.

But nowhere has the model been more utilized than at CNews, which occupies a unique place in the French



media landscape. The station launched in February 2017 and is broadcast free into all households. In the years since, it has gradually imposed itself as a low-budget French version of Fox News, beaming inflammatory talking points into the homes of around eight million viewers each day, according to Mediаметrie, a company that compiles television ratings. The news channel, where personalities come to comment on current events in studios without an audience, has an aging viewership — mostly people over 60, living in the provinces. On channel 16, all day long, hosts hold debates and argue as if at the local bistro, willingly letting themselves go into what the French call “dérapages” — outrageous remarks — but which have ended up becoming the editorial line.

The station has also given voice to the far-right National Rally leaders like Marine Le Pen, Jordan Bardella, and Sébastien Chenu. (Le Pen and Chenu are now seated in France’s lower parliament, the Assemblée Nationale, thanks to a wave of support for Le Pen during the 2022 elections.) The stunning result came on the heels of CNews pundit **Éric Zemmour’s** failed presidential candidacy during which he called for “zero immigration,” banning headscarves and yarmulkes from public spaces, and building a wall to keep out immigrants. Though he failed to make it past the first round of voting, Zemmour’s candidacy marked a turning point in the political landscape. When trying to understand how public opinion has veered so far to the right, many ex-

perts point to the Bolloré family and their most provocative asset, CNews.

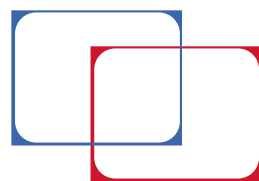
French economist Julia Cagé, who studies democracy, media pluralism, and campaign finance, compares Bolloré to the Koch brothers, who used their wealth to create a system of think tanks and advocacy groups designed to peddle influence. “His influence goes far beyond the media,” she says. “It extends to the publishing sector, to the financing of university chairs. It’s a strategy that amounts to influencing all forms of thought production.”

The Bolloré Group has become a matter of democratic concern. In 2021, the non-governmental organization Reporters Without Borders published a short documentary on Bolloré’s different media outlets, denouncing “these repeated attacks on press freedom and the independence of editorial offices [which] constitute an unprecedented threat to democracy.” In February 2022, a collective called “Stop Bolloré,” composed of unions, associations, journalists, and left-wing pundits, denounced the billionaire’s construction of a “tentacular media empire” which serves a “reactionary ideology.” “The editorial line [of CNews] shows an obsession with far-right themes,” they wrote. “Breaking with all journalistic ethics, it is no longer a matter of informing citizens, but of transforming minds.”

That day in 2022 in Brittany, as the company was being handed over to the 7th generation of Bollorés, the

**Éric Zemmour, the controversial television personality turned politician, campaigns in front of the Eiffel Tower on Mar. 27, 2022. Despite ultimately failing in his bid for the presidency, Zemmour has gained notoriety — and a dedicated following — in France thanks in part to his incendiary rhetoric.**

ANTOINE GYORI/CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES



**“[Bolloré’s] influence goes far beyond the media... It extends to the publishing sector, to the financing of university chairs.”** JULIA CAGÉ, FRENCH ECONOMIST

media empire was stronger than ever with an influence that resonates across France. And even though the company’s leadership technically changed hands, the man that turned it into a behemoth wasn’t completely stepping aside. “I am handing it over,” Vincent Bolloré said. “But I do not intend to disappear.”

**B**ORN IN 1952, Bolloré spent his formative years between the family mansion in the Bois de Boulogne on the western edge of Paris, the Breton village of Ergué-Gabéric, and Saint-Tropez (where the Bolloré family keeps its yacht). His father, Michel, was a fixture of Parisian high society and a close friend to President Georges Pompidou. But Michel Bolloré nearly bankrupted the family business. It was his youngest child, Vincent, who took the helm, diversifying its activities into energy, agriculture, transport, logistics, maritime freight, and advertising. Under Vincent’s leadership, the Bolloré group expanded into more than 100 countries. His logistic business in Africa, which has represented up to 80% of the company’s profits and a portion of which has been sold, had come under legal scrutiny. In 2018, Vincent Bolloré was placed under investigation by the Central Office Against Corruption and Financial and Tax Offences. “In February 2021, Mr. Bolloré admitted to his responsibility on charges of active corruption of foreign public officials and complicity in breach of trust in Africa,” *Le Monde* reported. “The Bolloré group was suspected of having paid for services provided by Havas, a Vivendi subsidiary, during the election campaigns of the Togolese and Guinean presidents, in exchange for favors relating to the ports of Lomé and Conakry.”

It was in order to involve his son Yannick, a night owl with little interest in the group’s industrial activities, that Bolloré claims to have invested in the media. Thus, in 2005, he launched the Direct 8 television channel, an almost surreally amateurish and fully live station that airs political and entertainment programming, and *Direct Matin*, a free daily paper, in 2007. About five years later, he sold them both to the Canal+ Group, then owned by Vivendi. He negotiated a share exchange, which allowed him to gain a foothold in Vivendi. Initially a small shareholder, Bolloré quickly amassed a larger

ownership stake through share buybacks, until he became the largest shareholder of Vivendi in 2012, which gave him some measure of control of the media properties he sold to Canal+ a few months earlier.

CNews was built on the ruins of its predecessor, *i-Télé*, a news network owned by the Canal+ group, which folded after a historic editorial strike in October 2016. That protest was one of the longest in the history of private broadcasting and led to the departure of some 100 journalists, freelancers included, according to the unions involved. The strike had been a reaction to the hiring of the TV host Jean-Marc Morandini — Bolloré’s friend — even though he was under investigation for the “aggravated corruption of minors” and “sexual harassment and undeclared work.” (One of the complainants alleged that Morandini had asked him to masturbate in front of him as part of an audition.) Morandini received a one-year suspended sentence in the first case and a six-month suspended sentence in the second, though he has appealed both.

*i-Télé* positioned itself as something like a low-budget CNN, with reporters in the field and a focus on hard news, economics, international affairs, and politics. But the channel hemorrhaged money, and the debate format, which is much less expensive, gradually took over the programming schedule. In May 2016, Bolloré installed Serge Nedjar, a loyal former head of *Direct Matin*, as the station’s general manager and editorial director, a move that signaled a departure from traditional editorial standards of objectivity. (*Direct Matin*, which was renamed CNews a few years later, for example, has been accused on numerous occasions of serving the interests of Vincent Bolloré, by promoting *Autolib*, the company’s electric car sharing service, and sporting events broadcast by Canal+.)

Once CNews was launched in February of 2017, the newsgathering operation was effectively overpowered, and opinion programming dominated the station. “We no longer watch a news channel to know what’s going on! We have all the news on our smartphone,” Nedjar told *Le Parisien* in June 2020. What mattered now was debate, he said, adding “We don’t restrict ourselves to any theme or speaker on the subjects that concern people.”

If the channel does not explicitly claim a political affiliation, the “freedom of expression” attitude CNews clings to has a well-defined slant. On the channel’s flagship program, “*L’Heure des Pros*,” guests shout at each other without much concern for the facts. Immigration is a consistent theme as are perceived security threats, the hijab, the headscarf worn by Muslim women, and, increasingly, the American cultural import dubbed “*le wokisme*.” It is possible at CNews to wax sarcastic about global warming when the temperature drops below freezing. A journalist can relay, without being contradicted, the false statistic that “50% of young Muslims in the suburbs claim to support the Islamic State” or describe the new icon of the environmental left as “a menopausal Greta Thunberg.” A video of Didier Raoult — a medical doctor and champion of the anti-vaccine movement — comparing the treatment of those who



don’t vaccinate to that of the Jews during World War II was aired on the channel to little contradiction.

Then, on Oct. 31, 2021, a line was crossed when Renaud Camus, the explicitly xenophobic writer whose catchphrase the “Great Replacement” — which posits the “native” French population will be supplanted by immigrant populations — was invited over the protests of the editorial staff. Traditional media have witnessed the rise of this station with a mix of bewilderment and contempt. *Le Monde* published a piece “A week watching only CNews,” as if it were a journey in a foreign country, and *Télérama* has a humor column that regularly targets the egregiousness of the guests.

The radicalization of news channels is, of course, an international phenomenon. But CNews has attracted international attention for being more than just another right-wing network. More than merely supporting a candidate, it produced its own — Zemmour, who ran for president in 2022 drawing comparisons to former President Donald Trump. “Trump went from reality TV to the White House. But he was the candidate of the Republican Party, while Zemmour is the candidate of an audiovisual group,” former President François Hollande said in an interview with *Corriere della Sera* in October 2021. “We reproached Silvio Berlusconi for putting his TVs at the service of his political career, but now there is a private group, Bolloré’s, which has chosen Zemmour as the spokesman of its interests.”

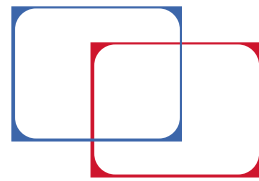
Zemmour, a prominent journalist who spent most of his career at the right-wing daily *Le Figaro*, was already

a familiar presence on both TV and radio, regularly playing the specifically French role of the literary reactionary. He joined the staff of CNews as a special contributor in October 2019. Every day, on “*Face à l’info*,” Zemmour would read an op-ed, then debate the day’s current events with an opponent, under the benevolent arbitration of a supposedly “unbiased” host. In this role, Zemmour has defended the bloody conquest of Algeria and the French general who led the slaughter. He has castigated unaccompanied minors: “They are thieves, they are murderers, they are rapists, that’s all they are. They must be sent back,” he declared, with little on-air pushback. During one debate, against the philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy, he defended one of his pet causes: the idea that Maréchal Pétain had actually saved French Jews during the Second World War — comments that led him to be prosecuted for “contestation of a crime against humanity.” (Pétain collaborated with the Nazis to deport French Jews. Zemmour was acquitted, but the Court of Cassation, the highest court in France, ruled in September that he be retried.) The audience tripled within a few weeks, and by 2021 reached as many as 900,000 viewers at a time — a huge success for CNews, which became the second most watched news channel behind BFM-TV, the leading all-news channel created in 2005.

Representatives for CNews, Bolloré, and the Bolloré Group declined repeated requests for comment. However, in July 2022 Nedjar defended the organization, arguing in *Le Parisien* that, “the extreme right has

**Vincent Bolloré speaks to the press in May 2016 during an event touting a line of electric buses made by the Bolloré Group. The sprawling company, founded more than 200 years ago, has over the years had business interests in the logistics, tobacco, media, and energy sectors, to name just a few.**

CHRISTOPHE MORIN/IP3 VIA GETTY IMAGES



**“The strength of CNews comes from the fact that, unlike Fox News, they present themselves as weak, the voice of the underdogs.”** ALEXIS LÉVRIER, PROFESSOR OF JOURNALISM HISTORY

not progressed because of our channel. ... We achieve 2.1% of the audience when France 2 and TF 1 do between 14% and 20%. We're given power we don't deserve.” Yet these numbers do not capture the extent of CNews's influence. In testimony before a Senate commission on media concentration in January 2022, Bolloré similarly downplayed his conglomerate's reach, saying it's “a dwarf” compared to companies like Apple, Sony, and Disney.

Zemmour's words, however, reverberated across the French media ecosystem. “No one [had] dared to speak of foreigners in these terms anymore,” says Alexis Lévrier, a professor of the history of journalism at University of Reims. Zemmour brought us “back to the words used in the extreme right-wing press between the two wars.”

Author Daniel Schneiderman in his book “The War Before the War,” which was published in 2022, drew a comparison between the radicalization of CNews and the anti-Semitic nationalist press that developed by ultra-politicized journalists — like Charles Maurras, a virulent anti-Semite — in the 1930s. The rhetoric remains useful for the far-right trying to motivate its electoral base, though the target has changed: It's now French Muslims — an estimated 10% of the population. In clear echoes of the anti-Jewish journalists of the past, Zemmour has repeatedly demanded that Muslims renounce their faith in order to “assimilate” into the mainstream.

“The strength of CNews comes from the fact that, unlike Fox News, they present themselves as weak, the voice of the underdogs,” says Lévrier, the media historian. “It's an inversion of reality: CNews' audience is certainly [relatively small], but they have rubbed off on the rest of the media.” France Inter, the main national public radio station has long been called in far-right circles “Radio bolcho,” for Bolshevik, because of their perceived left-leaning editorial line. Yet in 2021, they hired Alexandre Devecchio, a writer at Figaro Vox and editorialist at CNews, as a token of pluralism, giving him a much wider audience. Meanwhile, France 5, the main public television station, caused a stir when it tasked in February 2022 the Canadian polemist Mathieu Bock-Côté, a proponent of “anti-wokism” and substitute for Zemmour on CNews, with directing a documentary on

the presidential campaign. (CNews forbade Bock-Côté from taking on the assignment.) In recent years, French political journalists have regularly asked candidates about the “great replacement,” an idea Zemmour has promoted many times on CNews, allowing it to make its way from the depths of the ultra-right ideology to mainstream media.

In many ways, Zemmour has moved the country's Overton window. Le Pen's unprecedented victory in Parliament has meant not only a considerable fundraising boost for her party, but also more media exposure given the rules that require television and radio to give airtime proportionally to electoral weight. A recent study showed that by 2019-20 the air time share devoted on CNews to radical-right guests had increased by nearly 15 percentage points over the previous six years. In one week in August 2020, for example, former National Rally executive Jean Messiha, an advisor to Marine Le Pen at the time, enjoyed more than nine hours of airtime on the channel in five days. CNews has also been criticized by Arcom, the French media regulator, for not respecting political pluralism and the rule that the different “currents of thought and opinion” must have fair access to the airwaves. CNews was put on notice for having reserved “massively unfavorable programming conditions” for representatives of the government or the extreme left-wing party LFI, relegating their appearances to late night and at times of very low audience.

These ideological inflections can be seen in other outlets controlled by the Bolloré Group. On June 23, Geoffroy Lejeune was appointed as the top editor in chief of the Sunday newspaper, le Journal du Dimanche. Lejeune, is a friend and vocal supporter of Zemmour and had just been fired from Valeurs Actuelles, a far-right weekly magazine, for being too radical. The news of his arrival at the helm of a centrist newspaper that has become an institution, sparked an outcry from all across the political spectrum. Since then, the outlet has hired three journalists from RT France, a propaganda channel financed by the Russian state and suspended in France since the invasion of Ukraine.

**I**N JANUARY 2022, Vincent Bolloré was interrogated by the French Senate's commission on media concentration. He was not the only target of inquiry. The commission interviewed all the other French media tycoons including Patrick Drahi, founder of cable operator Numericable (which became Altice), and Xavier Niel, who owns a stake in Le Monde. But Bolloré's hearing was among the most anticipated. Defining himself as a “Christian Democrat,” he denied pursuing an ideological project. Media, he argued, is a very lucrative business. Yet, he defended the “treasure” his empire is built upon — French history and culture: “When we do Versailles, when we do Clovis, it's more interesting than when we do Superman 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, etc.”

A confidential internal audit, however, revealed the financial difficulties facing Vivendi's channels. CNews was supposed to break even for the first time in 2022 but instead ran a deficit of 4 million Euros, according to La Lettre, an investigative news outlet that looks at



the workings of France's political, economic, and media powers. CNews' weight in public debate has not been converted into profits, the news outlet concluded. “It would appear that, for Vincent Bolloré, the interest in controlling this channel lies not in its profitability, but solely in its influence on public debate.”

In April 2022, Bolloré Africa Logistics was sold to MSC Group for 5.7 billion euros, giving the company a considerable influx of cash. But that didn't mark the end of the company's influence across the continent. “The Bolloré Group will remain strongly involved in Africa, notably through Canal+, and will also continue to develop on this continent its activities in many fields such as communications, entertainment, telecommunications and publishing,” the company said in a statement.

Four days after the family ceremony in Brittany, Vivendi officially launched a public buyout of Lagardère — which owns Hachette Livre — the world's third-largest publishing group. Bolloré had previously bought Editis, France's second-largest publishing group, and was planning to merge the two companies into a gigantic conglomerate. On June 9, the European Commission's antitrust authorities gave the green light to the public buyout on the condition that the group must divest Editis. On July 25, the European Commission announced an investigation into whether Vincent Bolloré's group had committed an “anticipated takeover.” It could impose a fine of up to 10% of its revenues. That case is still pending.

Since Yannick took over, not much has changed

at CNews. The programming is still feeding off of and creating divisions within France. The station's coverage of the Oct. 7 attack on Israel and Israel's bombardment of Gaza has prompted anti-Muslim commentary. After the attack, the host of “L'heure des Pros,” Pascal Praud, framed the war as a “conflict of civilization,” asserting that, “Israel is at the tip of the West, and what is played out there may one day be played out in Paris.” A few days later, Éric Zemmour was invited to comment. He affirmed his support for Israel's self-defense and stated “the West is in mortal danger because of the growing Islamization of all our countries.” Another guest suggested that “many Muslims work on building sites and have access to explosives; if there were an order to kill Jews, there could be an attack every day.”

And in recent weeks, a CNews host asked a guest whether the infestation of bed bugs in Paris could be linked to refugees and a columnist called for the “recolonization, if only economically” of Africa.

Vincent's mark is still being left on the company. It was with Vincent himself that Czech billionaire Daniel Kretinsky directly negotiated the purchase of Editis from Vivendi. The sale, announced in June, is a key step to satisfy regulators that would otherwise block the company from acquiring Lagardère. Vincent is also supervising takeover proposals for Telecom Italia, of which Vivendi is the main shareholder.

Despite stepping down, Vincent Bolloré isn't stepping away. ■

**Yannick, Sebastien, and Cyrille Bolloré attend the annual meeting of Vivendi's shareholders in Paris on April 24, 2023. Though Yannick and Cyrille have taken control of the Bolloré Group, Vincent has remained active in many of the company's deals, including the sale of Editis to a Czech billionaire.**

ABACA PRESS VIA ALAMY STOCK PHOTO





# JOURNALISM NEEDS LEADERS WHO KNOW HOW TO RUN A BUSINESS

**These are the five crucial skills for the next generation of media leaders in the era of community-centric journalism.**

BY LAURA KRANTZ MCNEILL | ILLUSTRATIONS BY EIKO OJALA

**The news industry is entering a new era**, and after so many failed attempts at transformation over the past two decades, we're wrestling with the fundamental question of our time: What kind of business is journalism, and who does it serve?

We don't yet have one clear answer, but the question itself signals the magnitude of the transition underway. And like most seismic shifts, change has started slowly, on smaller levels.

Now it's time for the next step. If we want this new era to move us closer to a healthier, more sustainable future, it's time to rethink how we define the qualities of those who will lead us.

If you peer inside most media organizations today, you'll see change efforts already taking place. We have more meaningful metrics, more creative products, better audience research, and more inclusive workplaces — though all of these areas, especially



the last, require more work. There are new roles, like audience strategist; new formats, like WhatsApp groups; and new policies, like six months of paid family leave in some U.S. newsrooms.

Most of these changes have come from the bottom up, pushed slowly and painfully by people who devote their personal time and energy to inching toward a new way of thinking. The changes are innovative, and they are having positive impact, but often they are piecemeal, and ephemeral.

If we want these changes to stick, if we want them to

be expanded and codified into a new way of operating a media organization, and a new way of thinking about our role in society, we need leaders at every level who are the biggest champions of change.

So what does this new leadership blueprint look like? I set out to answer that question by talking with 26 of the smartest innovators and changemakers in our industry. They come from diverse backgrounds, careers, and organizations, but they were remarkably unified as they described this new skillset.

We need people with a service mindset, who under-

stand how to run a business, but a business with a mission that's more important than ever. We need leaders who embrace new revenue models, run toward chaos, and are excited to build new structures from the ground up. We need leaders who are generous, who nurture the careers of their employees, and who are serious about creating diverse and inclusive workplaces. And we need leaders promoted for their skills and their thoughtfulness, not their loud voice, charisma, or pedigree.

As the experts described this new skill set, it was clear that something deeper is shifting in journalism and the very values that underpin the work we do. We're far beyond the era of mass distribution, and we have also moved past the early digital days when clicks were all that mattered.

Today we are moving closer to our communities, online and in person, and we're trying to do a better job of listening to the people we serve — and to those we don't yet serve. We need leaders who strive to provide value to the lives of their communities, with the goal that, in return, they can earn their financial support.

Here are the top five skills and mindsets that evolved from my interviews. I hope these concepts guide those who hire leaders, as well as those who aspire to become them. They're also skills that existing leaders can, and should, adopt. And they are skills that every journalism school should teach.

## 1 WE NEED LEADERS WHO THINK LIKE PRODUCT MANAGERS

■ **And understand that a publication's value is defined by the communities it serves**

**For a long** time, career pathways in the media industry have mirrored the siloed business model of our legacy print organizations. Just as our product, the newspaper, was largely divorced from its primary revenue stream, print advertising, so too were the career trajectories of our leaders. Skilled reporters and editors rose through the newsroom ranks while savvy advertising executives climbed a separate career ladder, each setting separate goals and confronting separate challenges.

What's more, our industry created something like a religion around the notion that a firewall separated the two halves, making it feel sacrilegious for newsroom leaders to think of themselves as business executives or name revenue as a factor in decision-making.

The internet, of course, shattered this business model, but the religion has proven more difficult for us to renounce. This has been particularly detrimental when it comes to leadership trajectories because we now need leaders who understand both halves.

The discipline of product management, central to the technology industry, offers us tools to work differently. Product thinking is a practice that starts by understanding the needs of the user — the audience — then works to create a product that meets those needs.

In a newsroom, product thinking could be as simple as starting a story-planning meeting by examining audience survey findings, or interviewing newsletter

subscribers about their information needs. These small changes are examples of the mental shift that comes from thinking of journalism as a product and our community as the users we serve. It's a framework that leaders at all levels, in organizations of all sizes, can learn whether or not they have the word "product" in their title.

Most importantly, product thinking finally unites the goals of those legacy newsroom leaders with their advertising counterparts because it prioritizes the needs of the customer — the community. Product thinking offers us not a renunciation of our religion, but a new way of practicing.

"It's somebody who thinks about money and impact at the same time," said Alison Go, a product and strategy consultant.

Perhaps the most valuable aspect of a leader who thinks like a product manager is their ability to break down the siloed, hierarchical legacy structures of media organizations that now impede our progress.

The people who learn to work in this cross-functional way are often those in non-traditional roles within a news organization. By nature of their work they may lack formal authority so they learn to lead through influence out of necessity, said Rebekah Monson, co-founder and chief operating officer of Letterhead, a newsletter platform.

Think, for example, of a social media manager, Monson said. That person behaves much like a product manager, coordinating efforts across multiple departments and convincing leadership of how to use content to grow their online audience. Their scope is inherently wider than someone in a traditional newsroom role, especially if their work involves a budget. From an early stage they learn stakeholder management, data-based decision-making, and how to manage up and sideways.

## 2 WE NEED LEADERS WHO CAN STRATEGIZE

■ **And converse with the community**

**Unlike the days** of print, leading a media organization today means guiding it through a jungle of possibilities, none too certain, for how to become sustainable. In this environment, the need for strategic thinking has never been more urgent.

Thankfully, digital distribution of news makes it easier than ever to gather the type of insights necessary to build a case for a certain course of action. This includes metrics, of course, but that data only shows insights on what has already been published. More important is the kind of information gathered on the front end, through conversations with the people we serve. That type of research is the key to setting a truly transformational strategy.

"The people who are really going to lead, and really make a difference for organizations, are the people who are setting the strategy," said Kelly Ann Scott, former editor in chief and vice president of content at Alabama Media Group who was recently named executive editor



of the Houston Chronicle. “They’re staying high level enough, talking about what you want to be, how you’re going to pay for it, and who you’re serving.”

Strategic thinking enabled the team at Alabama Media Group to chart a new and more sustainable course for the organization and the way it produces and supports local journalism.

In 2023 the organization, which is owned by the national media group Advance Local, ended print production of its four daily papers. It now operates AL.com, the main news site, The Lede, its suite of daily e-editions, as well as other community-focused brands including the Alabama Education Lab and People of Alabama. The organization has also launched two national brands, Reckon, which covers social justice and activism, and It’s a Southern Thing, a lifestyle publication. It also operates a film production group, Advance Originals.

By launching brands around specific audiences and interests, they have been able to build community, create meaningful discussions, and help people find commonalities amid today’s extreme polarization, Scott said. All this has also helped create sustainability.

Because the industry faces so much disruption and upheaval, it’s no longer important to promote someone who is the best at any one skill set, Scott said. There can always be a second-in-command who is the journalism expert, but it’s more important that the top leader understands where the industry is headed and can set a vision for how the organization can move forward.

“In today’s news organizations, if you aren’t setting very clear priorities for your room and for what you want to be, the daily news cycle will eat you, the business troubles will eat you, the uncertainty about the

industry will eat you,” Scott said. “And then you stand for nothing.”

Part of the reason that strategic thinking — and the kinds of theories and frameworks that are foundational to nearly every business school curriculum — have not been a part of legacy news operations is because many journalism leadership roles have historically lacked formal training.

“There is very little, if any, training on ‘What does it mean to be a leader? What does it mean to manage? What does it mean to do a good job in those things?’” said Cheryl Thompson-Morton, director of the Black Media Initiative at the Center for Community Media at the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at CUNY.

We need more formal training in journalism schools about business leadership, said Evan Smith, co-founder of The Texas Tribune who now serves as a senior advisor at both the Emerson Collective and the The Texas Tribune. It’s time for leaders, especially journalism start-up founders, to embrace the role of the CEO, even if they are learning on the job. The ethics and mission-driven nature of journalists make them excellent CEOs, he said, but we also need leaders who are comfortable asking for money and who acknowledge that they are selling a product.

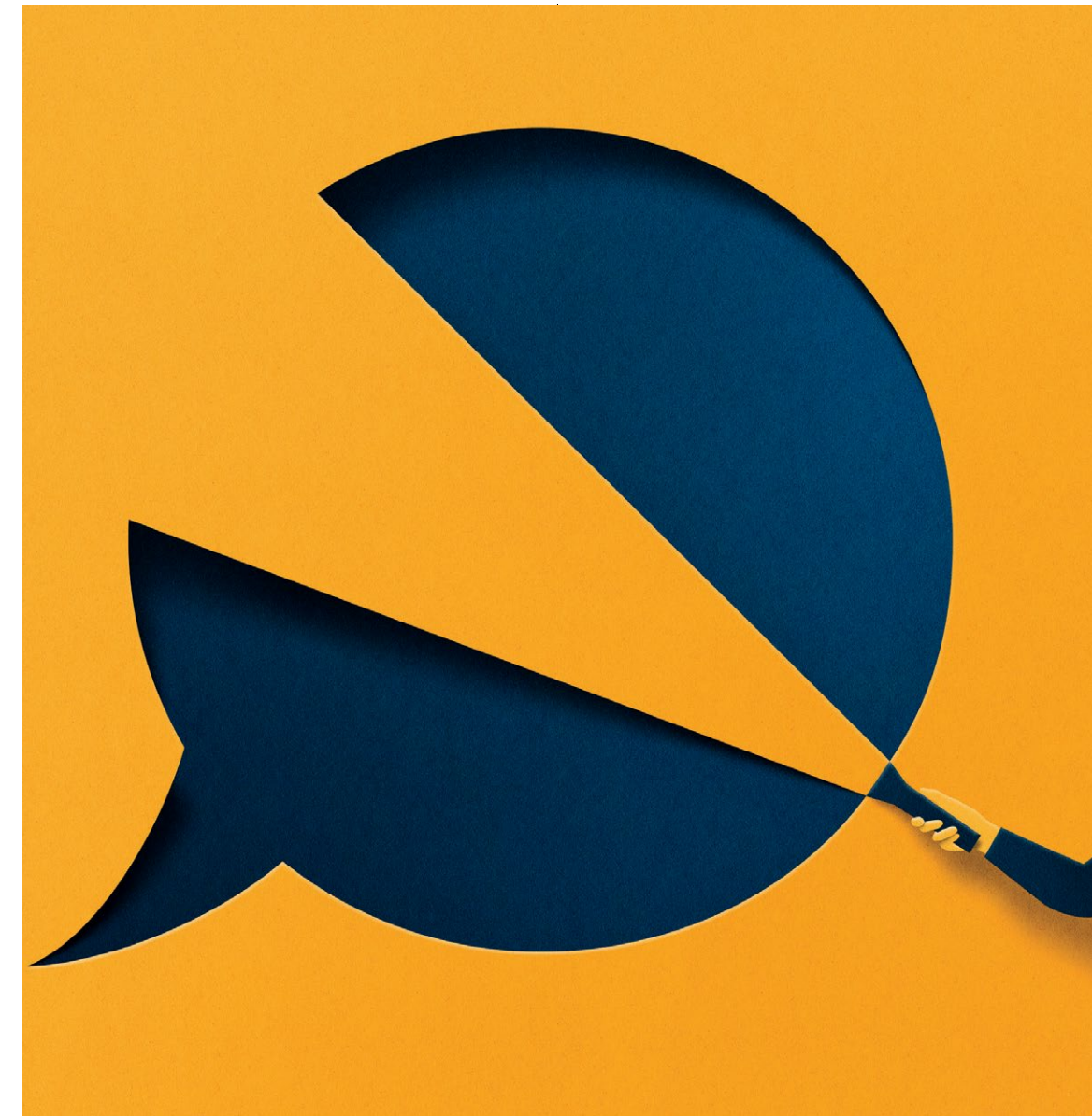
This is where journalism schools can step up. Leading the way are professors like Damon Kiesow, the Knight Chair in Journalism Innovation at the Missouri School of Journalism, who has written the first-ever textbook about news product management, and Aron Pilhofer, formerly the James B. Steele Chair in Journalism Innovation at Temple University who was recently named chief product officer at the Star Tribune in Minneapolis. They, along with the leadership of the Craig Newmark Graduate School at CUNY, recognize that journalists need formal business leadership training.

At Temple, Pilhofer taught a class in entrepreneurship and journalism that covered some of the fundamentals of product development and human centered design. His former colleagues also teach courses that touch on other digital skills, like podcasting and community-driven journalism, he said.

But in general, he said, those courses are one-off electives, not part of a new philosophy that underpins an entire degree program, and that puts legacy journalism programs “wildly out of step with where the industry is now and will be in the future.” Other programs are innovating successfully, he said, pointing to the digital media innovation degree at Texas State University and the Journalism and Design program at The New School as the direction the journalism training industry should be headed.

Kiesow teaches that news product thinking is entirely aligned with the mission of journalism, as well as with many of its methods. The roles share an interest in identifying gaps in knowledge and using the scientific method to reveal facts and insights in service to a community, he said.

His classes spend much of their time talking about practical tasks like survey design, in-depth interviews,



and data analysis, as well as cognitive bias and other risks in the process. These are skills journalists are familiar with, even if the business-minded vocabulary is sometimes new, he said.

### 3 WE NEED LEADERS WHO ARE EXCITED ABOUT BEING ENTREPRENEURS

■ And see opportunity in chaos

**If product thinking** is a practical framework that helps us produce better journalism, entrepreneurship is more about the attitude we bring to this work.

When the internet first rocked the industry, existential challenges fell in the lap of newsroom leaders who, until then, had largely relied on an age-old formula: Write stories, sell ads, then print them both in the newspaper. This is no longer the case. To aspire to leadership today, you must be excited to confront a world of frighteningly limitless possibilities for how to become sustainable, at a time when digital news avoidance and

mistrust remain high. New types of challenges and near constant chaos must excite you, the experts I spoke with emphasized.

We need bold entrepreneurs, they said, who aren’t afraid to trash those stale formulas, start fresh, and fail a few times along the way. Perhaps most important is that the next generation leads with a can-do attitude, experts said, finding ways to act rather than being paralyzed by past failures, endless options, or lack of clarity.

“You have to shift this mindset that our industry is in decline and you’re managing decline to the place of ‘I am building the future,’” said Scott of the Houston Chronicle.

Today, it’s not only the business model and new technologies like artificial intelligence that present challenges, but a news landscape that has left our communities exhausted and distrustful.

Trust in the news continues to fall worldwide, according to the 2023 Reuters Institute Digital News Report, with only 40% of people surveyed worldwide saying they trust most news most of the time. In the

U.S., that number is 32% and has increased slightly (6 percentage points) compared to 2022.

Shirish Kulkarni, a news innovation research fellow at Cardiff University in Wales, sees the problem less as “news avoidance” and more as people becoming “frustrated sense seekers.” The problem, Kulkarni writes in an essay for [Journalism.co.uk](http://Journalism.co.uk), is multifaceted but related to legacy business models. Audiences “are making a rational decision not to consume our products,” he writes. “That failure is on us, but it also means there are opportunities to address that frustration — largely by telling different stories in different ways.”

Given this backdrop, we need leaders who find new ways to provide information that doesn’t make people want to close our tab in their browser or let their subscription lapse.

Because there is no longer a formula, we need nimble leaders who can localize what they see working elsewhere and create replicable solutions, said Thompson-Morton, of CUNY.

“There’s so much that is just out of our control,” she said. “People have to be excited by that, and not afraid.”

## 4 WE NEED BUSINESS LEADERS WHO ALSO EVANGELIZE OUR MISSION

■ And whose devotion to our cause brings others along

**All this talk** about business models understandably gives some journalists an uneasy feeling. We devote ourselves to this work because we believe in our duty to hold the powerful to account and arm citizens with information. If we say journalism is just a business, does that corrupt our mission?

The answer is that both can be important at the same time; both are necessary for the survival of our industry. Sustainability doesn’t have to come at the expense of all we stand for, and we need more candid ways of talking about journalism’s mission as it relates to a news organization’s business model.

Some pushed the idea further: If we now say our goal is to serve our readers, perhaps it is time to state more clearly that our mission is one of service. And perhaps we should craft that mission in partnership with the communities we serve.

That kind of transparency requires vulnerability both within your organization and with the public, said Candice Fortman, the executive director of Outlier Media in Detroit, but it can lead to deeper trust. Imagine if the news industry had been honest with readers during the financial collapse of the early 2000s, she said, and asked communities to step up by explaining just how dire the financial situation was. That kind of communication can be scary, but it also brings us closer to the people we serve and demonstrates how much we believe in the civic importance of what we do.

Leaders must also be able to use the mission to mo-

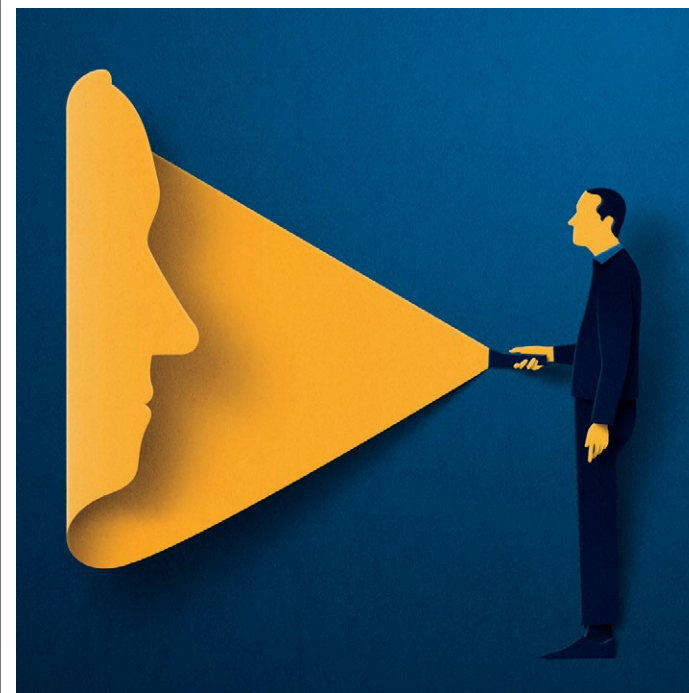
tivate their staff. Journalism attracts people who want to make a difference in the world, and motivating them requires tapping into that drive, leaders said.

“If you do not have a very well-defined mission, you should figure out what it is, because that is the most powerful and unifying thing you can do — [to] explain the why,” said Hannah Yang, chief growth and customer officer at The New York Times.

Part of that means explaining to employees the context of what you’re asking them to do. As simple as this sounds, it’s not done enough, she said.

For example, before The Times’ quarterly earnings calls, Yang tries to step back and remember that the subscription numbers she shares hold important symbolism and send a message to the world not only about The Times, but about the future of paid journalism, she said. She makes a point to explain to her team, especially new members, why the number is important and how meeting short-term goals is connected to meeting long-term goals.

“Why I work so hard is because I literally care about the impact of this organization on the world,” she said. “And feel that us succeeding will make this world a better place, so if you really internalize that as a leader, it will come through in how you lead.”



## 5 WE NEED LEADERS WHO CONSIDER THEMSELVES STEWARDS

■ And who position our organizations, but more importantly our people, for success

**During this project** I worried about ending up with a list of garden-variety leadership skills that could apply to any industry. I tried to zero in on skills specifically necessary for the news business.

That felt especially important when it came to this category of “soft” skills, a term that already devalues crucial capabilities like listening and empathy. Vital qualities for every leader will always include self-awareness, authenticity, vulnerability, good communication, the ability to learn and change your mind, and a real commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

What I found, however, is that there is something more that we need from future media leaders when it comes to this category. In fact, I think this type of skill is the most crucial for those who will lead in the years to come. We need leaders who focus on creating an environment where people can thrive, and see journalism as a byproduct of that, the experts said.

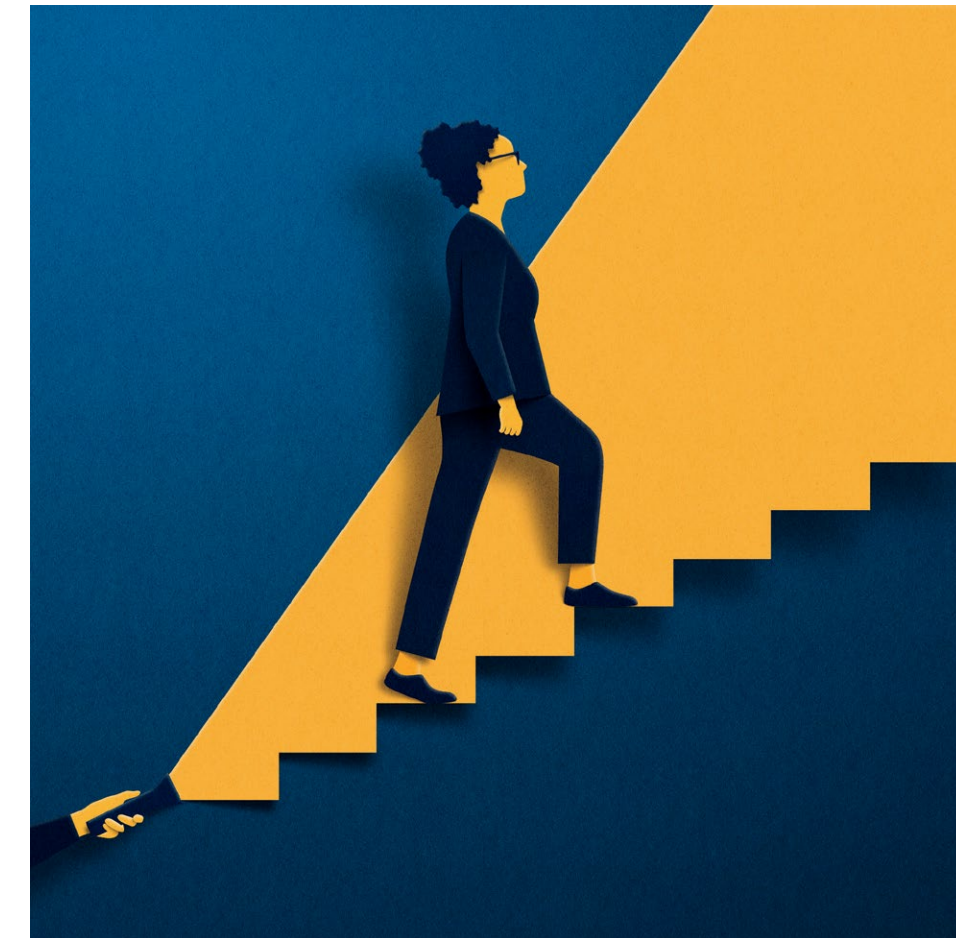
Smart leaders recognize that they don’t own their organization or their employees; the best they can do is leave both better off than when they found them.

Amid all the pressure and uncertainty news leaders face, we need people who still make time to invest in their staff, helping employees chase their goals even if that leads them to a new job. This can be as simple as asking an early-career staffer about their long-term ambitions during your weekly check-in, or making time for them to participate in a professional development course. It can mean asking a promising young editor to lead the story planning meeting once in a while, or allowing staff to shadow other roles across the organization on a short-term basis.

It’s true that someone might find a role they like better or use their new skills to leave for another job, but they’re also sure to leave if they feel stymied. And if we view our industry as a collective, training up our talent is never a waste.

This is especially important for women, people of color, and other underrepresented groups. We need leaders who understand that we can’t move our industry toward sustainability if our workplaces don’t allow people of all backgrounds to feel that they belong and have an equal chance to thrive. The experts I spoke with pointed to the many talented people that our industry has lost because they weren’t given opportunities for growth, or were driven out by bad managers, non-inclusive policies, or a lack of diversity. We need leaders who consistently ask themselves who is not at the table, who is not in the meeting, whose voice is being left out of the conversation and the decision.

A failure to focus on careers and skill development, and a lack of attention to the ways that workplace policies — like a lack of substantive, equitable family leave, internships that don’t pay enough to afford the city’s housing, or a lack of training for hiring managers on how to recruit a diverse pool of candidates — can disadvantage not only certain groups of workers, but future generations of them.



## WHO MUST TAKE ACTION NOW?

**One question I’m left** wondering after synthesizing everything the experts had to say is whether it’s really just the next generation that we’re talking about. Journalism is in crisis today, and if we wait for new leaders, we waste time. It’s good that motivated change-makers are disrupting journalism from within, but it’s also true that current leaders can often do more to support those efforts.

Indeed, those who lead our organizations and teams today have an obligation to engage if they care about sustainability. This new leadership blueprint doesn’t depend on whether you are a millennial or a boomer, or your job title, it’s about a new way of thinking that we all can cultivate.

So much needs to change in order for our industry to find its way to sustainability, but I’ve come away from this project with more hope than dread.

There is so much fervor inside our organizations. The experts I spoke with are exhausted, make no mistake, but they also see a future for our industry that’s better than its past.

If those who hold power today understand the value of this new skillset, if they work to develop it themselves, and if they help other changemakers climb the ladders that lead to the very top of our organizations, we might get to that better future. ■



# 97\*

The number of deaths among  
journalists in Gaza are  
'unparalleled and unprecedented.'

BY JOHN DANISZEWSKI

\* AS OF LATE APRIL

T

en years ago, AP photographer Anya

Niedringhaus died in Afghanistan, shot dead in her car by a fanatical police officer who also badly wounded her close friend, AP journalist Kathy Gannon. Killings of journalists in Afghanistan, Gaza, and Syria in that crisis year brought deep grief and soul-searching in the journalistic community.

The ISIS beheadings of Jim Foley and Steven Sotloff in Syria, especially, widened the public's awareness of the extreme danger global journalists face daily to bring reliable information to the world.

In response, many organizations made improvements in safety protocols, invested in training and protective equipment, and supported the creation of ACOS, A Culture of Safety Alliance, an organization dedicated to supporting freelance and local journalists, especially those covering conflict.

As international editor of The Associated Press, I was deeply involved in all these activities.

But in the ensuing decade, the situation for journalists has only worsened. The war in Gaza, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the rise of authoritarian governments, the miasma of misinformation fostering distrust and suspicion, the impunity shown by governments, and the lack of accountability or shame for killers and jailers of journalists mean that the ground underneath our profession has become even more treacherous.

In Gaza and Israel alone, since Hamas' deadly Oct. 7 attack on Israeli settlements and a music festival, some 97 journalists and media workers were confirmed dead by late April, among them 92 Palestinians, two Israelis and three Lebanese, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists.

That is more journalist fatalities in one conflict zone in six months than have occurred in one year worldwide since CPJ started keeping the data in 1992.

**PREVIOUS SPREAD:** Relatives and colleagues mourn the deaths of journalists Saeed al-Taweel and Mohammed Sobh, who were killed in Israeli airstrikes while filming the targeting of a residential building.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: MUSTAFA HASSONA/ANADOLU VIA GETTY IMAGES



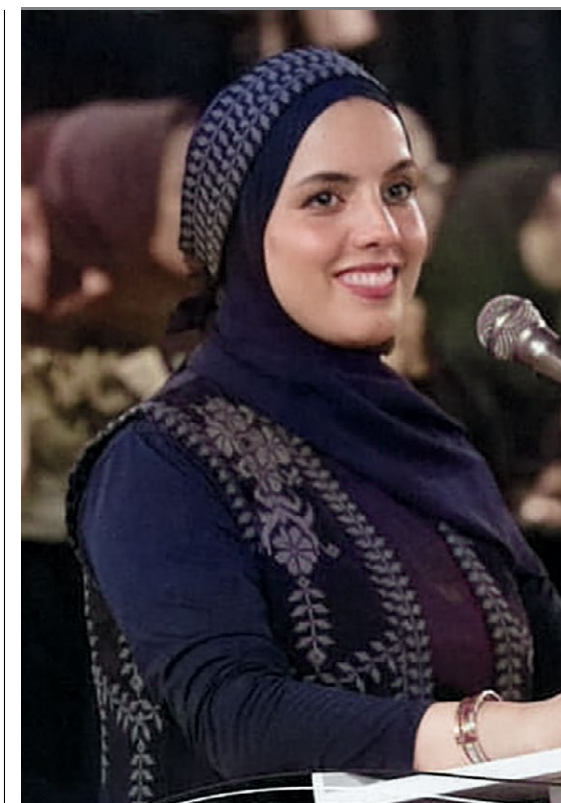
### Hamza Al Dahdouh

Jan. 7th, 2024

Hamza Al Dahdouh, the eldest son of Al-Jazeera's Gaza bureau chief, Wael Al Dahdouh, was killed when an Israeli drone struck the car he was traveling in while on assignment in southwest Gaza, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. Described as both a journalist and cameraman for the network, the younger Al Dahdouh was reportedly on his way to interview civilians affected by the bombing of a so-called humanitarian zone. Hamza documented the chaotic scenes in hospitals, the injuries sustained by children, the cramped conditions in refugee camps, and makeshift morgues both for Al-Jazeera and his more than one million followers on Instagram. Hamza was the fifth member of his family to die in the conflict.

Among the Palestinian journalists who perished in Gaza, there is uncertainty about the numbers killed intentionally for their work reporting on the conflict and how many were victims of the Israeli bombardment of the densely populated 140-square mile strip of land that is home to more than two million people. But in at least a dozen cases, there were indications of the deliberate targeting of journalists, according to CPJ. Among them is Al-Jazeera's Hamza Al Dahdouh, the 27-year-old son of one of Gaza's best-known journalists, Al-Jazeera bureau chief Wael Al Dahdouh, who had already lost four family members in Israeli attacks. The car that the younger Al Dahdouh was traveling in was struck by an Israeli drone Jan. 7 returning from an assignment near Rafah,

COURTESY OF AL-JAZEERA/THE KHADOURA FAMILY



### Ayat Khadoura

Nov. 20, 2023

Ayat Khadoura, 27, was a freelance broadcast journalist and online podcaster known for having a beautiful voice and her desire to shed light on the struggles faced by the people of Gaza, according to colleagues. Khadoura, who studied digital media at Al Quds University, was killed in an Israeli air strike on her home in northern Gaza. She had become internationally recognized for her videos showing people mourning loved ones, in need of medical care, and scrambling to find food. "As much as people have filmed and documented what's happening, there are some things you can't explain," she said in an Instagram post shortly before her death. "When the war ends, who'll be left to tell people what happened to us?"

killing him and another Palestinian colleague, Mustafa Thuraya. Israel said that they were suspected of being terrorists and noted that a journalist team with them had flown a drone over the site of a prior Israeli attack. The families of Al Dahdouh and Thuraya vehemently denied the terrorism accusation.

"What we saw is unparalleled and unprecedented and of course that means it has far-reaching consequences," said Sherif Mansour, CPJ's former Mideast coordinator, noting that the suppression of reporting means less credible information for the rest of the world, especially given that most international journalists have been denied access to Gaza. "In many ways this has been the most dangerous assignment or environment that we have seen for journalists."

The fallen journalists included in this story are among the nearly 100 who have been killed since the conflict between Hamas and Israel began October 7. These profiles demonstrate their range of backgrounds; the great majority are Palestinian, but a few Lebanese and Israeli journalists are among the dead. Their experience varies from young photographers just beginning their careers to more seasoned writers and editors who had been covering conflict for years.

**Al Jazeera Gaza bureau chief Wael Al Dahdouh holds the hand of his son Hamza, who also worked for Al Jazeera and was killed in an Israeli airstrike near Rafah in southern Gaza in January.**



“When journalists are killed, we lose the ability to understand and to document the war,” he added. “We need journalists to understand the motivations of the warring parties and the implications of their policies. If we don’t have journalists, we lose a window to what is happening.”

The deaths among journalists come as the number of total deaths in Gaza have risen to more than 34,000, according to health authorities in the Hamas-controlled territory, as Israeli air and ground forces have sought to destroy Hamas and its fighters and eliminate any future threats to Israel. Like the general population, journalists have been forced to evacuate Gaza City in the north for southern Gazan cities like Khan Younis and

Rafah. There they find shelter with relatives or wherever they can, struggling for food, water, and fuel to live while documenting the attacks. Even so-called safe areas have increasingly been struck. With death random, many continue to work out of both a sense of duty and a fatalism that nowhere is safe.

This loss of lives occurs in a region where reporting has long been under serious threat. CPJ’s accounting of journalists killed since Oct. 7 includes reporters who are freelance or employed by Palestinian news outlets, some affiliated with the Hamas government, or for an array of Arab and Middle Eastern television stations or news agencies. A few have been employed by Western agencies, such as Reuters video journalist Isaam Abdallah,

HATEM ALI / AP

who died Oct. 13 when, according to CPJ, two Israeli tank shells fired at his position in southern Lebanon even though he and other journalists around him were wearing press insignia and standing near a car labeled “TV” while documenting back and forth fire. Six other journalists were injured in the incident.

Historically, labeling oneself as press and keeping cameras and equipment visible during combat has offered some measure of protection for journalists. But the soldiers firing on these journalists either did not believe the insignia, or did not care. Or there could be a darker agenda: censorship — to deny the world their reporting, especially at a time when international correspondents are being denied access.

COURTESY OF RASEEF22



### **Mohammed Atallah**

**Jan. 29, 2024**

Mohammed Atallah, 24, worked as an editor for Al-Resalah, a local Palestinian news website, and as a freelancer for Raseef22, a regional outlet for which he covered the latest Israeli bombing campaign, the stigma associated with mental health care, and suicides among Palestinians. As a journalist, Atallah was interested in reporting on political affairs, according to his biography on Raseef22. He was killed in an Israeli airstrike on the Beach refugee camp near Gaza City. “Mohammed was a very professional journalist,” Ayman Sharrouf, an editor with Raseef22, told the Committee to Protect Journalists. “He wanted to relay the voices of the people. He worked hard on his pieces and was very keen on factual reporting of the daily life of Gaza’s people.”

Prior to the present fighting, CPJ documented in a May report that Israel Defense Forces had killed at least 20 journalists over the past 22 years, and not one IDF soldier was punished or held accountable. The report, titled “Deadly Pattern,” concluded that the Israeli government evaded responsibility for the deaths by dragging out investigations, accusing the journalists of being terrorists, keeping the evidence classified, and saying their troops feared for their lives. In one high-profile case, Shireen Abu Akleh, a 51-year-old Palestinian-American correspondent for Al-Jazeera, was killed while covering an Israeli raid in the city of Jenin in the West Bank. Investigations by several news organizations, including The Associated Press, concluded that she was not near

## Ola Atallah

Dec. 9, 2023

Atallah, 43, was an independent Palestinian journalist who reported for multiple news organizations including the Anadolu Agency, a Turkish news outlet. She began covering conflict between Gaza and Israel in 2008, wrote about the conflict in Syria in 2016, and reported on the plight of Gazan fishermen. An award-winning journalist, Atallah graduated with distinction from the Islamic University of Gaza in 2002 with a degree in journalism and media. She was killed with nine other members of her family in an Israeli airstrike in Gaza City, according to CPJ. Her last personal essay was published in November, titled “A Message from Gaza, a Different City,” in which she wrote “this war’s horrors cannot be described in all the languages of the universe.”



## Yazan al-Zuweidi

Jan. 14, 2024

Al-Zuweidi worked as a photojournalist for Al-Ghad TV channel, a broadcaster launched in Cairo. He worked there for six years covering wars and conflicts in Gaza over that period of time. Ahmed Ouda, head of Al-Ghad TV’s Gaza office, described Yazan as a “polite, generous, energetic man who was eager to work hard and learn.” Al-Zuweidi, who was 27 when he died, “would be prepared to film live videos from the roof of the Al-Ghad Office building in Gaza, and would be bold enough to livestream events that showed Palestinians who were killed and wounded on the sites of conflict,” Ouda added. Al-Zuweidi died in an airstrike in northern Gaza, according to CPJ.

active fighting when she was shot while wearing a vest that clearly marked her as a journalist. Israel has said the bullet that killed her was likely fired by an Israeli soldier, but it blamed crossfire with Palestinian militants — a claim contradicted by videos taken that day.

In early April, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vowed to expel Qatari-owned Al Jazeera from operating inside Israel, accusing it of being a “terror network” and actively participating in the Oct. 7 attack. The move came after parliament passed legislation allowing the prime minister to shut down any foreign-owned news organization deemed a security threat. The network called the accusation a “dangerous lie” intended to further suppress independent reporting of the conflict, and one that could lead to greater risk for

## Heba Al-Abadla

Jan. 9, 2024

Al-Abadla, her mother, and her daughter, were killed when an Israeli airstrike hit her house in Khan Younis, according to the Palestinian Journalists Syndicate. The 30-year-old contributed as an anchor to local radio networks, including Al-Azhar Radio, that is affiliated with Al-Azhar University, which focuses on campus news. She also worked with Internews, an independent publication that covers the West Bank and Gaza. Al-Abadla was a founder and board member of Social Media Club Palestine, which memorialized her on Facebook. “She was a real example of what hard work looks like,” the club wrote. “She was a determined, active soul, who left a legacy behind that we’ll never forget.”

its journalists. Qatar is among the few Arab countries that has acted as a mediator with Hamas.

**W**ith this astounding loss of life, and the continued verbal, physical, and legislative attacks on independent journalism itself around the world from sources as diverse as Vladimir Putin, supporters of the MAGA movement in the United States, and Mexican criminal gangs, journalists and those who care about truthful factual reporting are left to wonder again: What can be done?

Putin’s cynical hostage-taking in the case of Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich, falsely accused of espionage and imprisoned in Russia for a year as a bargaining chip with the West, shows the utter con-

COURTESY OF THE AL-ABADLA FAMILY



## Saeed al-Taweel

Oct. 10, 2023

Al-Taweel was the editor-in-chief of Al-Khamsa News, an independent television station and website that covers everything from the conflict in Gaza to technology and sports. He died after Israeli airstrikes hit an area in Gaza City where several media outlets were located, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. Al-Jazeera reported that al-Taweel was out in the field filming a building expected to be a target when he was killed. Known as a “kind-hearted” and “generous” editor among his colleagues, al-Taweel held a master’s degree in journalism and mass communication from the Islamic University of Gaza. He was also a media lecturer and was described as a leader within the Gazan media.

tempt with which some journalists are being treated.

It is clear the old slogans of “End Impunity” and “Journalism is not a crime” are inadequate to the moment.

While there was never a time of perfect security, the historic calculus between journalists and combatants has changed in dangerous ways. The ease with which even terrorists can communicate directly with the public has made reporters expendable or even targets themselves because their reporting has the power to shift public opinion or embarrass regimes. Longtime international correspondent Richard Boudreaux, now a standards editor at The Wall Street Journal in London, notes that this change is a dramatic generational shift.

“When I was in Latin America in the 80s and early

COURTESY OF THE AL-TAWHEEL AND YAGHI FAMILIES



## Mohamed Yaghi

Feb. 23, 2024

Yaghi was a freelance photojournalist who worked with Al-Jazeera and several other international news organizations. His father, Teshreen, said that Mohamed wanted to be a journalist since he was a young boy and loved his work, having pursued a university degree in media, according to Al-Jazeera. At the time of his death, Yaghi was working on a documentary about civil defense servicemen in Gaza. He was killed in an Israeli airstrike in Az-Zawayda, a town in central Gaza, along with his wife, young daughter and more than 30 other family members, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. In an article marking his death, Al-Jazeera noted that Yaghi was highly skilled as a video editor.

90s, the guerrillas and the death squads both wanted to woo the press. We were sought after; nobody was going to mess with us,” he recalled. But now, he said, “We found as we got into this new century ... they don’t need an intermediary.”

Two trends are working to undermine the safety of journalists. The first is the rise and ubiquity of social media, which in turn has led to the rapid spread of mis- and disinformation and a generalized decline in the respect for the role of a journalist as an arbiter of facts. The second is the market pressures on news organizations, which leaves them with fewer resources to defend and protect journalists in the field.

“Social media complicates safety, online harassment intimidates journalists, and it can get amplified thou-





### Mustafa Thuraya

Jan. 7, 2024

Thuraya was killed in an Israeli airstrike while reporting on the conditions in southern Gaza as the bombings stretched into 2024. He was on assignment in Nasr village getting video of the scene as emergency personnel were clearing human remains from the site, the Committee to Protect Journalists said. He died just a few minutes after two other journalists working nearby were injured. A well-known drone operator and freelance videographer, Thuraya studied media at Al-Azhar University, according to the Palestinian Journalists Syndicate. The 29-year-old worked for Agence France-Presse and other news outlets, covering life in Gaza and more recently the destruction of the latest conflict.



sands of times and can lead to real online and offline threats,” said Mark Grant, AP’s vice president for global security and safety.

In Ukraine, he said, the new technology of war makes it more dangerous for journalists in the field. Reporters are visible because of drones, which means it’s harder to operate independently and many embed with armed forces. That is both dangerous, in case of combat and attacks, and it results in a more limited, one-sided view of the conflict.

“Freelancers especially are at risk because they do not have a large news organization watching out for them, assessing risk, providing PPE and medical care and training,” Grant said.

In response, newsrooms are responding by using GPS and other technologies to track journalists in the



### Samer Abu Daqqa

Dec. 15, 2023

A cameraman for Al-Jazeera, Samer Abu Daqqa was killed in Khan Younis in southern Gaza, while covering Israeli strikes on a school being used as an emergency shelter. The father of four, who worked for the station for about two decades, was remembered by colleagues for his commitment to covering dangerous stories and his catchphrase “Ready!,” according to Al-Jazeera. “He was, as we say, a journalist’s journalist, somebody who loves to shoot and film and then would come back and tell you the best pictures that he captured,” Ayman Mohyeldin, a former coworker, told NPR. “He was a very funny, very witty but also a very serious cameraman who took his job with a tremendous amount of professionalism.”



field and lock down or wipe devices remotely when necessary to keep sensitive information from falling into the wrong hands. “Just as the people who are trying to prevent journalism get more sophisticated, we have to do the same,” says Kerry Paterson, the U.S. director of safety at AP, noting that journalists are being deployed with more advanced lifesaving medical supplies as well.

Frane Maroevic, executive director of the International Press Institute, the press freedom advocacy organization based in Vienna, said that it is sadly indicative that measures used in the past to protect journalists have become a threat in themselves.

“The symbol of the press that journalists put on their cars, the blue vests, the blue helmets that they wear ... these are no longer symbols for protection,” he said. “They seem to be quite often the target because of that.”

COURTESY OF THE THURAYA FAMILY AND AL-JAZEERA



### Issam Abdallah

Oct. 13, 2023

Issam Abdallah, a 37-year-old visuals journalist for Reuters who reported from several conflict zones, including Ukraine, Iraq, and Syria, was killed in Lebanon while covering fighting between the Israeli military and Iran-backed Hezbollah militants. A native of Lebanon, Abdallah worked out of the Reuter’s Beirut bureau and began working for the company as a freelancer 16 years ago while he was still in university. “I have learned through all the years of covering conflicts and wars with Reuters from around the region that the picture is not only front lines and smoke, but the untold human stories which touch us all inside,” he wrote, according to his obituary, after being on assignment in Ukraine.



On Feb. 13, days after we spoke, two Al-Jazeera journalists wearing vests clearly marked “Press” were struck by a drone fired at their motorcycle near the city of Rafah, maiming one and severely injuring the other. Al-Jazeera said it believed the reporters were deliberately targeted. Israel later justified the attack, saying the critically injured Ismael Abu Omar was a Hamas deputy commander who had been present at one of the massacre sites of Israelis Oct. 7.

Maroevic also warns that in addition to the two major conflicts now — Gaza and Ukraine — non-state actors elsewhere are becoming extremely aggressive against journalists and their reporting. “Journalists are being threatened, and also killed, at an alarming rate, which

COURTESY OF REUTERS/ISSAM ABDALLAH AND SHAI MAHLOOF VIA YNET



### Roeie Idan

Declared dead on Oct. 20, 2023

Roeie Idan, a photographer for Ynet, a prominent Israeli news site, was killed after Hamas attacked his home in Kfar Aza on Oct. 7. He was missing for 10 days before his body was found. Before his death, Idan photographed the initial moments of the attack, capturing images of militants paragliding into the area and Israeli defenses intercepting rockets fired from Gaza, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. The 43-year-old covered a variety of issues including local schools, rocket attacks, and Covid-19 but was said to be drawn to nature photography. His wife was also killed, though his three children — one was abducted but returned — survived the attack.



is also a huge threat that we did not see before,” he said. In Mexico, 153 journalists have been killed — many by criminal gangs — since 1992, making it one of the deadliest countries for journalism. (Only a handful of the perpetrators have been brought to justice.) In Sudan, since armed conflict broke out last year between armed factions, journalists have been shot, beaten, and harassed, according to CPJ.

Elisabet Cantenys, the Spain-based director of ACOS, the safety alliance, said safety for journalists is no longer clear-cut or confined to conflict.

“The use of spyware, online harassment and abuse targeting journalists has grown dramatically in frequency and intensity; misinformation and disinformation campaigns have become commonplace, and the use of lawfare and systematic legal and judicial harassment by governments, pol-



**Belal Jadallah**  
Nov. 19, 2023

Jadallah, founder and general director of Press House-Palestine, a non-profit that supports independent Palestinian media, was killed by an Israeli strike as he was evacuating Gaza City. Known as a father figure for local journalists, he helped train scores of reporters, hosted safety workshops, and distributed helmets and flak jackets. Jadallah also co-founded Sawa News Agency, an independent news outlet based in Gaza, and made Press House a place where weary journalists covering conflict could find relative safety and comfort. After the news of his death broke, tributes to his legacy began pouring in. “Belal was very determined to stay in Gaza City for over a month and strongly believed it was his moral duty to tell the world what he witness[ed] in the besieged small city, assisting the needy people around him,” his brother, Ali, posted on social media.

iticians and individuals is widespread,” she said in an email.

Since it began operating in 2015 in the aftermath of the 2014 killings, ACOS — which was supported in the United States by the Overseas Press Club Foundation — has grown steadily and sought to fill a void in first-aid training and other support for local and freelance journalists. That can include help in obtaining body armor, insurance, and situational safety advice. ACOS also holds workshops for editors to help them with risk assessments and understand the latest tools to keep journalists safe.

This work occurs against a backdrop of a financially weakened media industry. Reporters for big organizations are usually well-equipped, but not so the freelancers and local journalists on which the big organizations increasing-

ly rely. In places like Gaza and Ukraine, there is an abysmal shortage of protective equipment like body armor available to local reporters and freelancers.

The phenomenon of journalists being attacked through government-instigated or partisan disinformation campaigns also is growing.

“The disinformation that somehow journalists were informed of or knew about the attacks in Gaza and were somehow involved in terrorism by itself is not a new trend, but the fact that this trend is being used as a threat on journalists’ safety is,” said Maroevic.

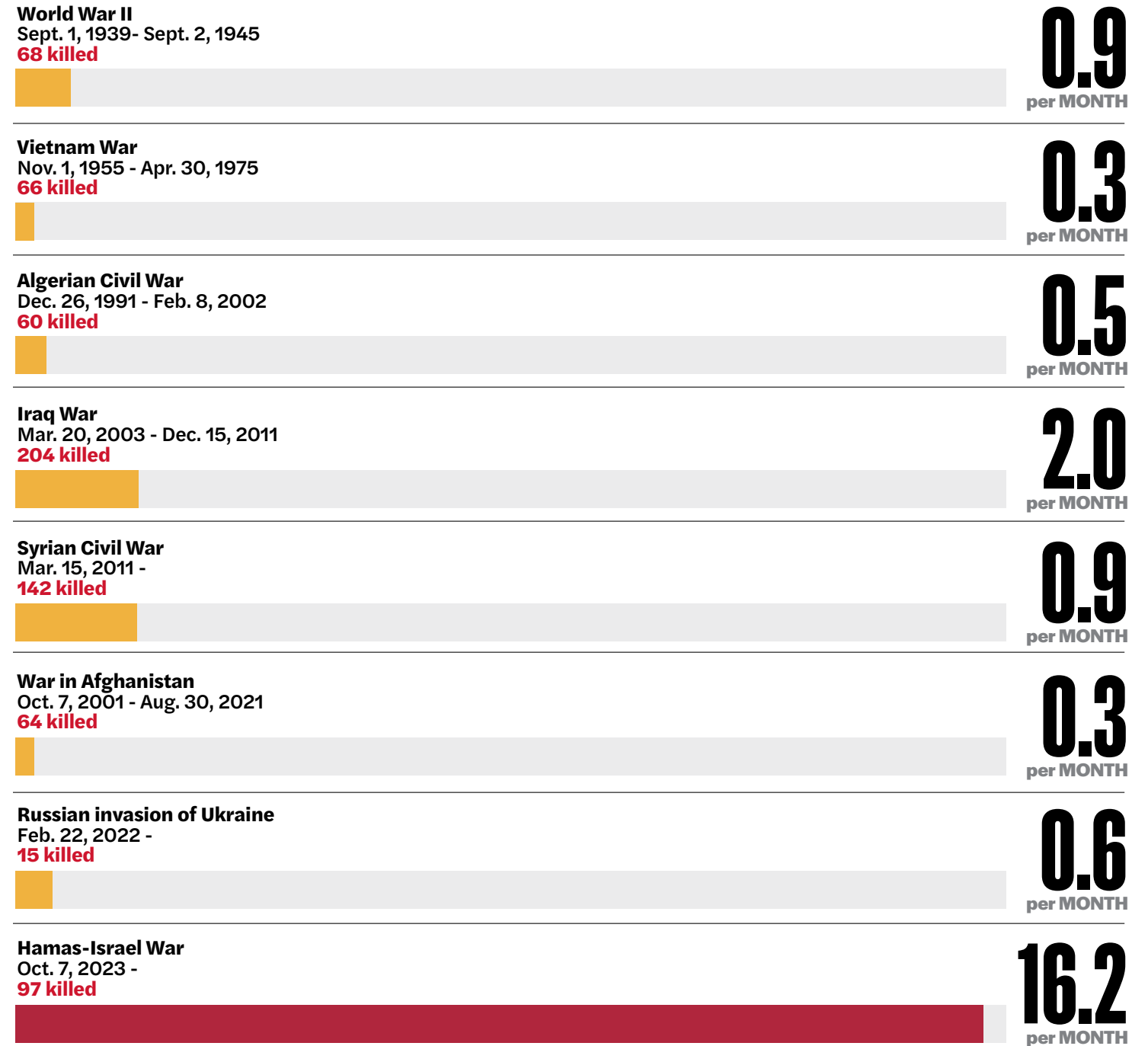
“Governments can foment a Twitter army against you,” said Boudreaux, and then take repressive actions in response.

COURTESY OF THE JADALLAH FAMILY

# DEATHS AMONG JOURNALISTS ACROSS CONFLICTS

Nearly 100 journalists have been killed in Gaza, making it one of the deadliest conflicts for media workers in the last century. But it’s not just the total number killed that has shaken the industry — it’s how quickly the number of deaths has risen in just a few short months. Since October, an average of 16 journalists have died per month in Gaza — a figure that dwarfs the fatality rate of the Iraq War, a nearly-nine-year-long conflict in which 204 journalists died.

SOURCE: Data compiled from the Committee to Protect Journalists’ website as of Apr. 22, 2024



Among the other assorted dangers cited by Cantenys are cross-border killings of journalists, spyware such as the Pegasus program that track journalists’ movements, and lawsuits intended to financially bleed news organizations.

Running through today’s conversations about the safety of journalists is a sense that, in the words of AP’s Paterson, “the space that was held for journalists has been damaged. It is no longer as protective as it once was.”

Paterson recently joined AP after more than a decade at CPJ.

“To say that a journalist on the battlefield is a civilian, or that a journalist in this space should be allowed to do their job, there has been a real shift in that,” she said. “What you see is that when you chip away at the role that

the Fourth Estate plays, when you start to undermine the idea of why a free press is important, you actually quite literally put people in greater risk of harm.”

Of the many challenges facing newsgathering, one of the greatest, says Maroevic, is restoring respect for journalism.

“How can we define the role of journalism so that society also once again becomes, let’s say, a protective shield for journalists so that there is an understanding and respect for the role,” he said. “It’s not a magic solution, but it is I think important.” ■

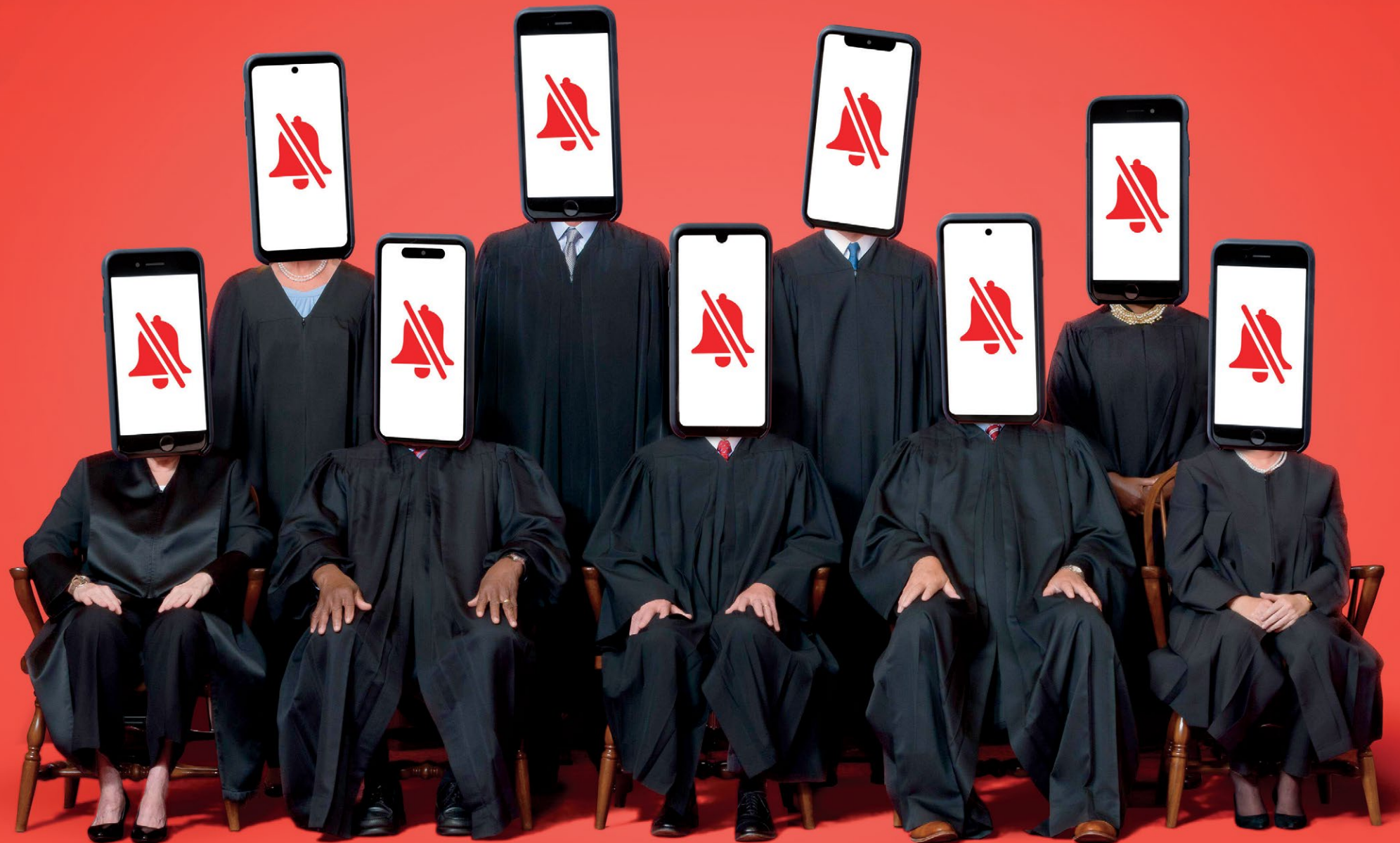
*Fatma Khaled, a freelancer based in Cairo, contributed research to the writeups of the fallen journalists.*

# SOCIAL STANDOFF

How Montana's TikTok ban and a handful of cases before the Supreme Court could give the government more power over social media

BY JARED SCHROEDER

ILLUSTRATION BY DOUG CHAYKA



**S**ocial media and the ways journalists use it are facing a legal reckoning in the courts.

This reckoning is easy to miss. We're accustomed to a seemingly never-ending stream of news and commentary about internet regulation, powerful companies like Meta and Google, and lawmakers' largely theatrical performances during congressional hearings featuring the CEOs of big tech firms. It's all talk, no action.

But a constellation of five cases, at least four of which will be decided by the Supreme Court this term, are far more than idle noise. The cases will shape the flow of information — for journalists and audiences alike — for the foreseeable future.

Two of the cases, *NetChoice v. Paxton* and *Moody v. NetChoice*, consider

laws from Texas and Florida that, in the name of protecting the marketplace of ideas, force social media firms to leave up posts and allow speakers access to their platforms that they would otherwise remove or block because they violate the services' community guidelines.

Another pair of cases, *O'Connor-Ratcliff v. Garnier* and *Lindke v. Freed*, are about whether a public official violates the First Amendment when they block citizens, including journalists, from their social media accounts.

And in the fifth case, a federal judge blocked Montana's TikTok ban from going into effect in November. That case, *Alario v. Knudsen*, will proceed, but last month's ruling stopped the law from going into effect at the beginning of the year.

Together, these cases raise crucial questions about the government's power to control of information in social media spaces. The outcomes of these cases will influence journalists' access to information and ability to hold powerful entities to account.

Former President Donald Trump's Twitter account was suspended after the Jan. 6 riot at the Capitol. Twitter said its decision was because of "the risk of further incitement of violence."

Gabe Rottman, director of the Technology and Press Freedom Project at the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, says these cases pose risks to press freedom. They require courts to look at First Amendment press-rights cases anew, after generally settling that area of the law decades ago — sparking fears new decisions will undermine long-cherished rights.

Rottman reasons that if courts weaken First Amendment rights that keep government from influencing the flow of information through social media, it might not be long before the government starts filing lawsuits against news organizations using those same court decisions as precedent.

"Claims like that have the potential for government influence in the content of news coverage, which is an existential threat to a free press," Rottman says.

Let's start with the two cases before the Supreme Court that question whether government officials can block people from their social media accounts. In the O'Connor-Ratcliff case, two California school board candidates created Facebook and Twitter accounts to help publicize their candidacies. When they were elected, they used the accounts to post school-related information. When Christopher and Kimberly Garnier, parents of students in the district left critical comments on posts made by school board members, their comments were deleted and they were blocked.

Under slightly different conditions, James Freed created a personal Facebook page long before he was appointed city manager of Port Huron, Michigan. He used the page to post a mix of personal and official information. When a citizen, Kevin Lindke, criticized Freed about the city's response to the pandemic, Freed blocked him. In both cases, the citizens who were blocked sued, claiming removing them and their ideas from the spaces limits their First Amendment rights.

The cases revolve around whether public officials have the power to control access by journalists and other citizens to the social media spaces they create. And they identify a tension between the privately controlled nature of most people's social media accounts and the public forum-like aspects of accounts used by public officials to communicate about matters of public concern. In other words, is a public official's social media account more akin to a private home or a city park?

There is little precedent to go on. The Supreme Court declined to hear a case involving former President Donald Trump, who blocked people from his Twitter

**"CLAIMS LIKE THAT HAVE THE POTENTIAL FOR GOVERNMENT INFLUENCE IN THE CONTENT OF NEWS COVERAGE, WHICH IS AN EXISTENTIAL THREAT TO A FREE PRESS."** GABE ROTTMAN REPORTERS COMMITTEE FOR FREEDOM OF THE PRESS



@realdonaldtrump

## Account suspended

Twitter suspends accounts which violate the **Twitter Rules**

account. He created the account when he was a private citizen, but it became one of his main tools for communicating when he was president. A federal appeals court ruled his Twitter account transformed into a public forum, like a public park, because he used it as part of his role as president, but the Supreme Court chose not to weigh in after Trump lost in 2020 and was banned from most of his social media accounts.

During oral arguments for both cases in late October, the Supreme Court seemed split over where the line between a private and a public social media space should be drawn for public officials.

Justice Elena Kagan emphasized the important role social media platforms have in public discourse. "More and more of our democracy operates on social media," she said. "This is the forum for officials to talk to citizens, for citizens to talk to officials, for citizens to talk to each other, and it is becoming increasingly so."

Justice Brett Kavanaugh seemed to favor protecting public officials' rights to block people from their social-media spaces. "Elected officials and appointed officials rely on groups of people who are supporters, friends, people they've known, people that are

fair-minded, not people that are just going to come and scream at them," he said.

The court will announce its decisions in the cases by the end of June. If justices deliver opinions that allow public officials to block individuals from their social media accounts, it could shift power to the government because the nation's mayors, police chiefs, lawmakers, governors, and political candidates could select reporters and news organizations they favor and block others. That would also make it more difficult for reporters to get timely information from elected officeholders and other government bureaucrats — especially as they find it increasingly useful to speak directly to their followers rather than engage with the news media.

"When an official, using an account they usually use to disseminate their perspectives on government business blocks a reporter, blocks a journalist — blocks, quite frankly, a regular person — from those accounts, there's a problem," says Jasmine McNealy, an associate professor at the University of Florida and a fellow at the Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society. "It's not a private account anymore. They've changed the nature of it from a private space to one that is official, like the

statements they would make if they were stating them in their official capacity."

**T**he questions posed by the NetChoice cases center around government control of social media spaces and ask the court to decide whether, in the name of the marketplace of ideas, the government can force a social media firm to leave up content and speakers that the service would otherwise remove.

The issue at the heart of Moody is Florida's social media law passed in 2021 after Donald Trump was removed from platforms like Meta, Twitter, and Shopify after the Jan. 6 riot at the Capitol. It provides Florida citizens and its attorney general mechanisms for filing lawsuits against and fining social media firms that block, ban, or algorithmically deprioritize content. (Trump's Facebook and Twitter accounts were later reinstated.) The law also explicitly halts social media firms from moderating content from most news organizations. If it's allowed to go into full effect, the measure would generally limit social media firms' abilities to moderate content published in their spaces.

SOURCE: SCREENSHOT

**“WHEN AN OFFICIAL, USING AN ACCOUNT THEY  
USUALLY USE TO DISSEMINATE THEIR PERSPECTIVES  
ON GOVERNMENT BUSINESS BLOCKS A REPORTER,  
BLOCKS A JOURNALIST — BLOCKS, QUITE FRANKLY,  
A REGULAR PERSON — FROM THOSE ACCOUNTS,  
THERE’S A PROBLEM.”** JASMINE MCNEALY  
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

Texas’ 2021 social media law, as outlined in Lindke, stops large social media sites like Facebook and YouTube from limiting expression based on a user’s viewpoints or geographic location within the state. Like the measure in Florida, the law would compel private actors and corporations to allow for the communication of ideas they would otherwise not share.

The Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals struck down Florida’s social media law in spring 2022, but the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals, in a feat of law-interpreting gymnastics, upheld Texas’s law as constitutional in September. The court concluded social media firms do not have First Amendment rights that are similar to individual citizens. “[T]he State can regulate conduct in a way that requires private entities to host, transmit, or otherwise facilitate speech,” the decision reads. “Were it otherwise, no government could impose non-discrimination requirements on, say, telephone companies or shipping services.”

That ignores multiple Supreme Court decisions that say otherwise. Justices affirmed that corporations receive First Amendment safeguards in the *Citizens United v. Federal Elections Commission* decision in 2010, noting that “the First Amendment does not permit Congress to make these categorical distinctions based on the corporate identity of the speaker and the content of the political speech.” Crucially, most news organizations are categorized as corporate speakers. A decision that concludes the government can compel social media firms to publish or leave up content and speakers could open the door for efforts to force news organizations to publish certain content and ideas — all under the guise of creating a fair marketplace of ideas.

Other precedents are squarely against the laws’ constitutionality as well. Almost 50 years ago in *Miami Herald v. Tornillo*, a unanimous Supreme Court resolved that the government can’t compel a news organization to publish. Decades earlier, the Supreme Court ruled the West Virginia Board of Education couldn’t force students to recite the Pledge of Allegiance.

These precedents, however, might not stop the court

from upholding the new laws. Justice Samuel Alito, writing to disagree with the decision to prohibit the Texas law from going into effect in 2022, noted the law raises questions of “great importance” about big technology firms and “the power of dominant social media corporations to shape public discussion of the important issues of the day.” Justices Neil Gorsuch and Clarence Thomas joined him in his argument.

These laws would make already toxic and often falsehood-filled social media environments even worse because they restrict moderation efforts. Even more concerning, however, are the precedents the Supreme Court would be setting if it upholds the laws. There is not a great distance between giving the government the power to force social media companies to host information they otherwise would not host and giving the government power to force news organizations to publish information it would otherwise not publish, according to Rottman.

Montana’s TikTok ban asks a similar question about government control, but here, rather than forcing a platform to publish, the state wants to block an entire channel of communication. Journalists, along with other citizens, would not be able to post or view content via one of the most popular social media platforms.

Citing national security concerns, Gov. Greg Gianforte signed a bill in May that prohibits the social media platform from being used in Montana and makes it illegal for app stores to make it available for download. TikTok’s



Montana Gov. Greg Gianforte signed the country’s first statewide ban of TikTok. A federal judge stopped the law from going into effect, but Montana has appealed the decision.

parent company, ByteDance, filed suit, arguing the law was an unconstitutional restriction on free expression.

The Montana ban is based on the idea that TikTok is a national security threat because of the way it extracts data from its users. Lawmakers have expressed concern that ByteDance, which was founded by Chinese entrepreneurs, could share data with the Chinese government — an accusation company officials have flatly denied. A federal judge halted Montana’s law from going into effect, reasoning it “unconstitutionally targets speech and that the law is subject to the highest level of constitutional scrutiny.” Montana’s attorney general filed notice in January that the state will appeal.

McNealy questioned the state’s reason for focusing on TikTok, noting many technology firms gather extensive information about users.

“The rationale they give for it doesn’t pass muster at all,” McNealy said. “Facebook has been collecting all kinds of information forever.”

The Montana case is one of the first to test whether the government can censor an entire social media platform, but the government has sought to ban or block newspapers in the past and the Supreme Court has rejected efforts to do so. In 1931, the first decision in which justices overturned a law because it conflicted with the First Amendment, the court ruled *Minnesota v. National Labor Relations Board* when government officials shut down the *Minneapolis Saturday Press* under a public nuisance law. The paper had attacked the mayor of Minneapolis,

the city’s police chief, and the county attorney, publishing generally untrue information about them. In a 5-4 decision, the justices held that the government couldn’t preemptively stop a publication from publishing. In the 1971 *Pentagon Papers* decision, the Supreme Court rejected the government’s national-security rationales for halting *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* from publishing stories that stemmed from a classified report on Vietnam, reinforcing this principle.

Montana is the only state to ban TikTok entirely, but more than 30 states and the Biden administration have banned TikTok from government-maintained devices and networks. In September, 18 state attorneys general filed a brief asking the federal court considering Montana’s ban to let the law go into effect. If the ban survives First Amendment challenges, it could spread to other states and potentially other platforms, limiting the channels journalists can use to report information and distribute it to audiences.

These cases don’t carry the spectacle and fanfare that often characterize congressional hearings, or the concern and lobbying efforts news organizations generally muster to support or fend off bills that would affect journalism. But they have emerged as a potentially transformative set of decisions regarding how journalists reach audiences and access crucial sources of information. And, that could create, in turn, a profound shift in governmental influence over editorial decisions. ■

THOM BRIDGE/INDEPENDENT RECORD VIA AP



# GENERATION #BRANDED

Teaching students how to live up to the trust news consumers have in social media has become a top focus for many journalism schools. BY JON MARCUS

**P**art of Izzy Gutierrez’s job as an intern at Nashville TV station WSMV was to produce peppy Instagram reels about what happens behind the scenes at the station’s lifestyle show, Today in Nashville.

There was Gutierrez getting ready for work, sipping her coffee on the way, and arriving at the office. Gutierrez at a pre-show meeting, writing flash cards, and setting up the mics. Gutierrez holding a video camera, interviewing guests for the pro-

gram’s Facebook page, writing segments for the following week’s episodes, and making more videos for other social media.

The Ohio native, who wants to be a lifestyle reporter, learned many of these skills at Middle Tennessee State University, where she is a journalism major scheduled to graduate in May.

Many employers have come to expect that journalists will know how to brand themselves on social media. “We want peo-

Previous spread:  
Izzy Gutierrez used Instagram to give viewers a behind the scenes look at WSMV, a local Nashville television station.

ple who are more like influencers doing these jobs,” Gutierrez says employers tell her.

The influencer phenomenon is not only changing how information is delivered and consumed. It’s complicating the job of journalism schools that are trying to impart conventional journalism principles to aspiring journalists who have grown up in the influencer era and see their roles in a different way than their predecessors might have. To adapt, journalism educators are now borrowing from such disciplines as marketing, public relations, and advertising while doubling down on teaching core reporting and media ethics principles.

“In a lot of ways, our students are marketing themselves,” says Amber Hinsley, an associate professor and program coordinator at the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Texas State University and former city editor of two community sections of the Los Angeles Times. “They’re thinking of themselves as professional storytellers and not necessarily professional journalists.”

To help them connect those roles, Hinsley has her students watch what working journalists are doing successfully on social media, such as showing themselves behind the scenes. “We try to bring in thoughtful ways of thinking about what is the message this journalist is telling.”

This is more than a minor adaptation, says Andrea Press, chair of media studies at the University of Virginia. “You have to cultivate different talents than you did before,” Press says. “What made you a good journalist in a prior era might be totally different from what makes you a good journalist in this one.”

When Matthew Taylor teaches his incoming journalist students at Middle Tennessee State, he finds he needs to explain what journalism is and why content needs to be solidly reported, rather than just a collection of clever takes designed to get likes.

“That has become very muddy for younger people” raised on social media slants on the news, says Taylor, an assistant professor in the university’s School of Journalism and Strategic Media, where he teaches a class in social media and sports. “In the past, it was more that students came in with an understanding of journalism and you were teaching them about such things as objectivity. We have to start at a more basic level now.”

But his department is also equipping students with the knowledge they need to stand out on social media. In addition to a core class in writing, students are required to take a class on digital media that covers how to create video, audio, photography, and other elements.

An influencer is a person who transforms him or herself into a brand using social media and builds a relationship with an audience through a regular flow of content, says Robert Kozinets, professor of journalism at the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism. (He also coauthored a textbook on the subject and teaches a course at USC called “Influencer Relations,” which covers social media as a cultural phenomenon and an aspect of contemporary communication, rather than coaching future influencers about how to do it.) That definition of influencer describes a growing number of journalists who often center themselves in stories on social media.

Knowing how to do this “has become a necessary skill,” says Taylor. “At a very basic level, if you aren’t going to offer courses that get very deep into social media, you need to teach social media in a way that helps students operate responsibly in that space.” Half of Americans now get at least some of their news from social media, according to the Pew Research Center. The proportion who regularly get news on TikTok has more than quadrupled in the last three years to 14 percent, Pew says, while 16 percent get news on Instagram, and 12 percent on X.

A growing proportion of users tell Pew that they trust what they find on social media almost as much as what they read, watch, or hear on conventional local and national news outlets.

Journalism schools are adapting to this reality. In addition to Kozinets’s class, USC’s Annenberg School offers master’s degrees in digital social media and digital media management. At Columbia Journalism School, a course in investigative techniques now covers how to use social media for reporting. Northwestern’s Medill School offers classes in social media marketing that can be bundled together into a certificate.

And showing young journalists how to live up to the trust news consumers say they have in social media has become a principal focus of many college-level journalism courses.

It’s one thing to be an influencer, but another to be a journalist who is an influencer, says Vicki Michaelis, director of the Carmical Sports Media Institute at the University of Georgia, which offers a certificate program in sports media that includes a class in social and digital media production.

To aspiring journalists, “the influencer is the person from whom they’ve gotten information,” Michaelis says. That sometimes skews how they understand journalism, she says, since influencers often win followers by having distinctive and often inflammatory points of view.

“We’ve always talked about voice in journalism, and when you talk about voice to students who come into J-school these days, they think you’re referring to their opinion,” says Michaelis, who covered sports for 21 years for USA Today, The Denver Post, and other outlets. “They’re used to ranting and raving and people presenting just really strong, direct opinions” on the social media they’ve grown up with.

She says she spends much of her time steering her students away from this approach. Still, journalistic objectivity “is a very hard thing to teach,” Michaelis says, noting it doesn’t necessarily mean giving both sides equal weight if they don’t deserve it and that “we bring our own experiences” to every situation. “Most of it is anchored to credibility, and that’s a really amorphous concept for them to understand. What I tell them is, their credibility is the most valuable thing they carry into this profession — and into cyberspace.

To make that stick, Michaelis says, she takes a practical approach: She reminds her students that employers want to hire human beings who can report facts and tell compelling stories, not give unsubstantiated opinions or recite inconsequential information that often fuels social media. “I start every class with, ‘Look if you’re just here

to give me a sports score, I’m sorry — you’ll be out of a job. AI can do that.”

This takes some adjustment, says Regina Clark, an associate professor of journalism at Ramapo College in New Jersey who teaches a course in writing for social media.

“My goal with students is to get them to think differently about how they communicate in terms of accuracy of information, paying attention to what they’re liking and sharing,” Clark says. Since most, if not all, of her students are already on social media, “I show them how to use it in a more accurate way.”

She does this by spending a lot of time discussing sourcing and how to identify fake news. Clark also asks each of her students to create a blog, a format more text-heavy than other kinds of digital media.

“We’re looking at it from a more professional space as newsgathering,” she says. “We’re not looking at it as your own personal Instagram or Snapchat. I make sure it’s clear on the syllabus that you’re going to have to do more than write tweets.” Students in the journalism concentration are required to have internships, too; if they expect that selfies with celebrities will satisfy employers, that experience will likely set them straight, Clark says.

Kozinets, at USC, says the angst around how journalists should act in cyberspace is as old as when the internet democratized access to wide audiences. “Part of this is the old game of the older generation trying to figure out what the younger generation is up to,” he says.

“When you ask someone who’s in a journalism program whether influencers can be legitimate guardians of the values of the press, they’re probably going to think of someone dancing around on TikTok,” Kozinets says. “But we’re into a radical redefinition of what news is. There’s a lot of entertainment mixed into the news. There’s a lot of celebrification of the newscaster.”

As for readers, viewers, listeners, and scrollers, “I don’t think they care whether someone is a professional journalist,” he says. “If people were to choose, they would probably choose to watch someone on the ground in Gaza who lives there reporting on what just happened in their neighborhood [rather] than hear from someone from behind a desk and filtering it.”

Press, the media studies chair, agrees that influencer culture is vastly changing journalism. “If you compare this to the climate for working journalists before the age of social media, I don’t think you can get any starker contrast,” she says.

“You have to be entertaining. That’s the priority. If you don’t happen to have that talent — which not every journalist used to have — then you’re not going to necessarily succeed.”

Journalism faculty who teach social media are also confronting a broader historical misunderstanding of its role by journalists in general, Michaelis says.

“When the internet came to be, [journalism] companies mistakenly thought that the internet was a way to direct the audience back to their newspapers,” she says. “They realized seven or eight years ago that they were making the same mistake about social media, when in fact the journalism needs to be contained within the social media, because that’s how the audience consumes it.”

Journalism students are newly demanding something else, too: more information about how to safely create the kind of content influencers do.

“One of the topics that’s gotten the most interest is when I talk about media law and, in particular, copyright,” says Hinsley. “I frame it as students thinking of themselves as content creators. They ask good questions about when is it okay to use certain images or music, and about protecting themselves from issues of violating copyright. That’s the world that students see themselves living in now, personally as well as professionally.”

Bryant Kwilecki, a journalism major at the University of South Alabama who will also graduate in May and hopes to be an on-camera sports reporter, made sure to take a course in social media and uses what he learned to produce a football podcast he cohosts on YouTube.

“You have to be different. You have to stand out from your competitors,” Kwilecki says. “You have to learn how to be — I don’t want to say clickbait, but you need to draw in those listeners, get those views, and target the audience you want.”

Journalism faculty who teach social media courses report that they are typically among the first to fill. At Ramapo, Clark’s classes often have waitlists.

“For better or for worse, we are definitely moving to a point where a journalist must consider bolstering their brand,” says George Bovenizer, who spent 27 years as a broadcast journalist and last worked at NBCUniversal in Los Angeles. He is now an assistant professor in the Department of Communication at the University of South Alabama, where he teaches a course in social media. “I do think journalists need to take some marketing lessons from influencers in order to stay relevant to a wider audience that is decreasingly watching linear news programs.”

The momentum of the influencer train may be long past stopping. But young journalists appear responsive to learning these kinds of skills before they jump aboard.

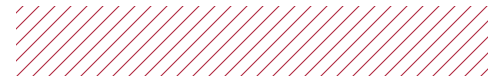
Before South Alabama senior Luke Vailes took Bovenizer’s class, he says, he was already on social media almost every day. “My brain was hard-wired to see the subjective things that are on there and the random people and not necessarily the objective truth,” he says. Taking the course “changed the algorithm around for me. I’ll get more thought-out things now, things from actual news stations, news websites.”

Rather than fear the transformation of journalists into influencers, says USC’s Kozinets, it’s time to acknowledge that the delivery of news is simply changing yet again.

People who despair for traditional journalism “are really desperately clinging to legitimacy because they think the ship is sinking,” he says. “But I don’t think the ship is sinking. There are just going to be a lot of little life rafts.” ■

**“IN A LOT OF WAYS, OUR STUDENTS ARE MARKETING THEMSELVES. THEY’RE THINKING OF THEMSELVES AS PROFESSIONAL STORYTELLERS, AND NOT NECESSARILY PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISTS.”**  
**AMBER HINSLEY**  
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR AND PROGRAM COORDINATOR, SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM AND MASS COMMUNICATION, TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY

# WANT TO REACH GEN Z? PRIORITIZE YOUNG VOICES



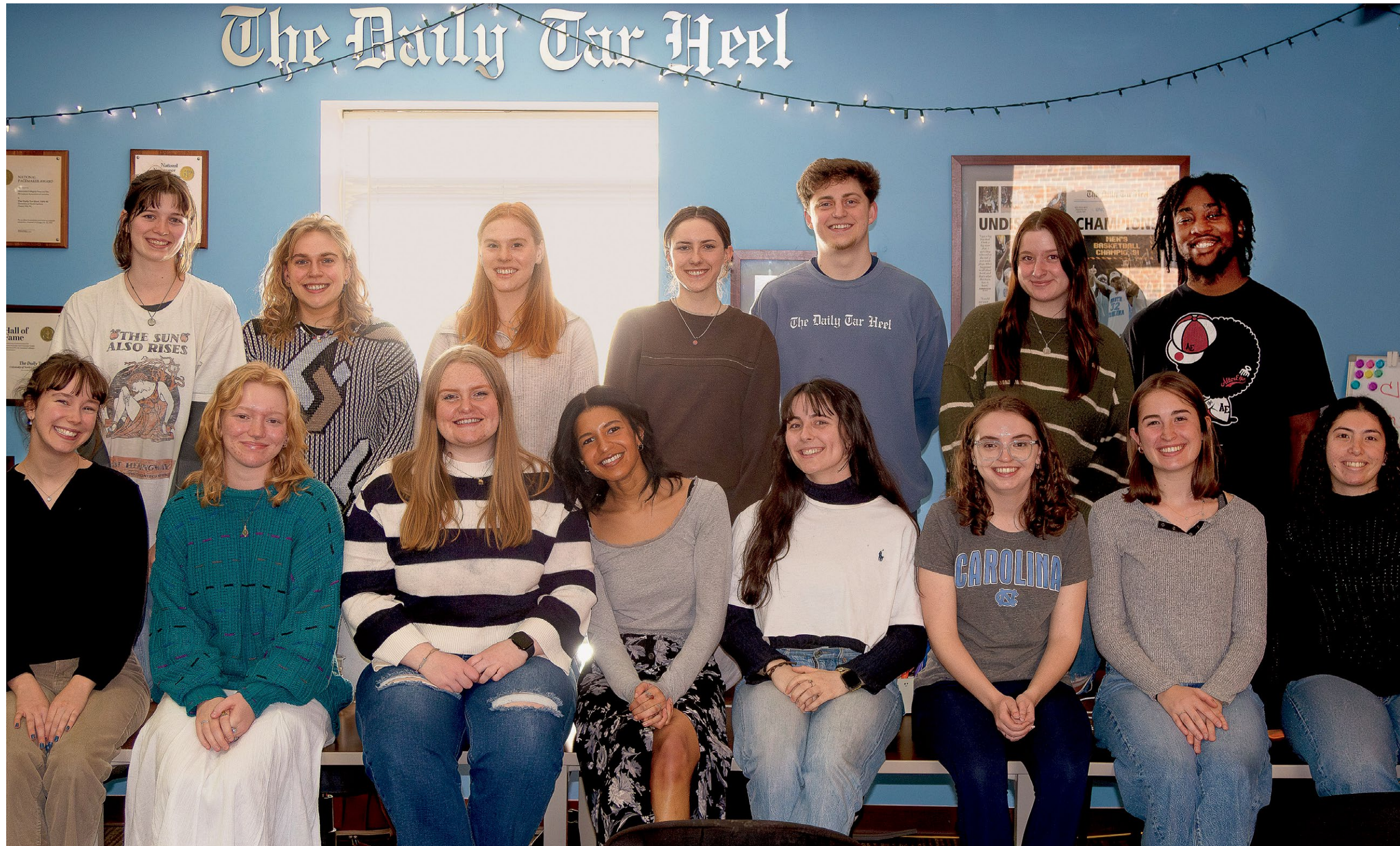
## Student journalists are key to engaging a critical demographic ahead of the 2024 election.

BY PRATIKA KATIYAR

**M**y college roommate gets her news from a talking fish on TikTok. And she's not the only one.

The "Talking Fish News" has 325,000 followers, and it is one of many accounts playing off of the beloved SpongeBob SquarePants character who is a talking fish news anchor in the show. The account, which reports on politics and pop culture, highlights the continuing trend of younger generations wanting to receive their news from characters and sources that resonate with them.

Younger audiences have, for some time, been turning to influencers and internet personalities rather than traditional, legacy news outlets for coverage of politics and current events, like conflict in Gaza. Fewer young

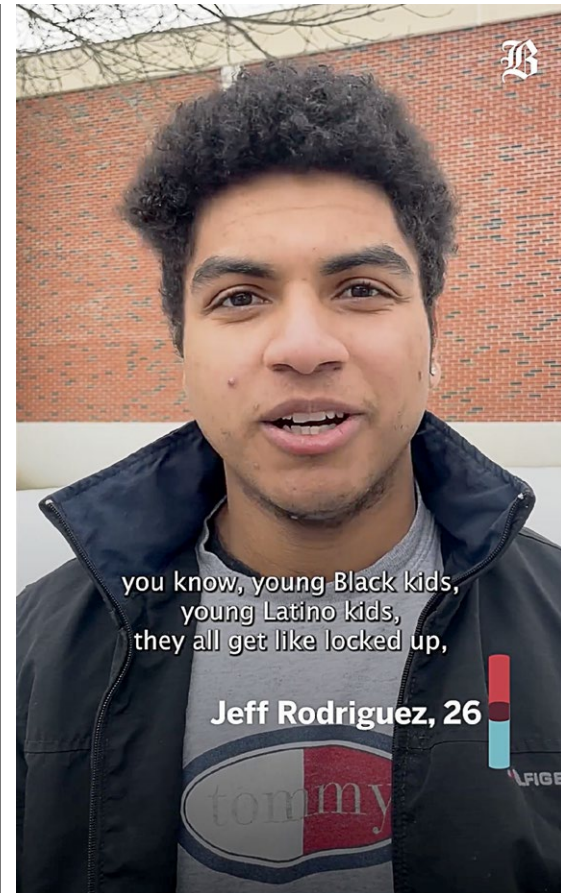




Previous spread: The staff of The Daily Tar Heel has covered everything from a fatal shooting and lockdown on campus to a decline in enrollment in the local public schools to North Carolina's efforts to reduce the cost of child care.



Welcome to the New Hampshire primary.

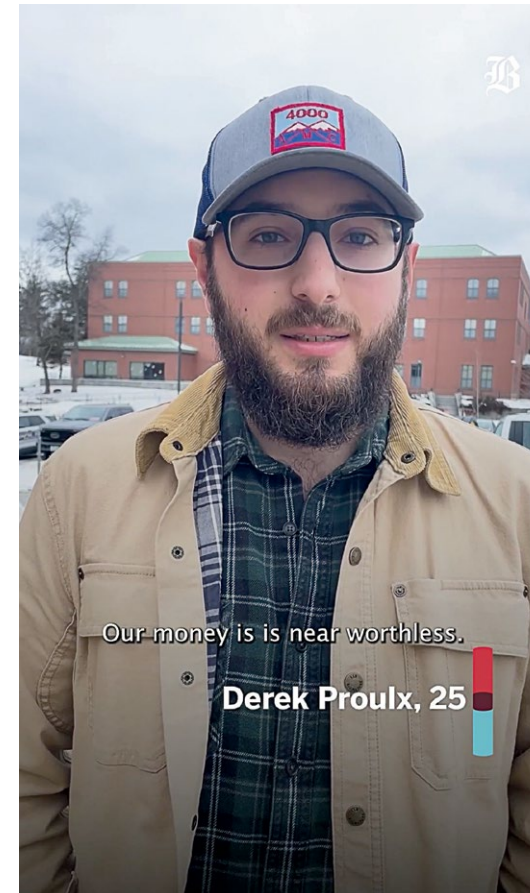


you know, young Black kids, young Latino kids, they all get like locked up,

Jeff Rodriguez, 26

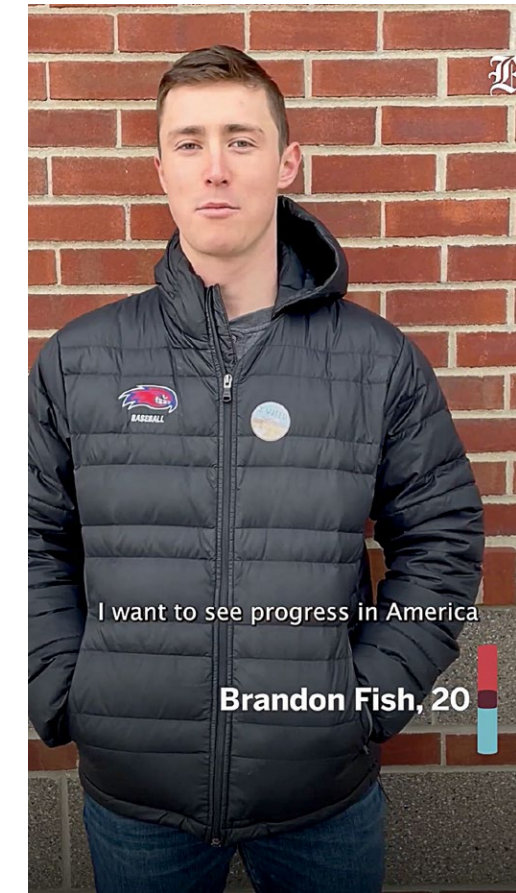


a little bit more about the war.



Our money is is near worthless.

Derek Proulx, 25



I want to see progress in America

Brandon Fish, 20

people are relying on news outlets, with only 24% of 18- to 24-year-olds using news sites or apps, and more than 30% of adults under 30 getting their news regularly from TikTok.

But there are obvious detrimental effects of getting your news primarily from social media — misinformation and disinformation chief among them. In fact, a Pew Research study found that Americans who get political news primarily from social media tend to be less knowledgeable on elections and politics. As we get further into the 2024 election and deepfakes generated by artificial intelligence become more prevalent, getting news from social media will only become more fraught.

How can we get Gen Z, 40.8 million of whom will be eligible to vote in November, the information they need to make informed decisions? One way to do that is to tap into the power of student journalists, who are adept at navigating the digital landscape and have a finger on the pulse of campus life.

Student journalists have been covering their campus communities and filling the local news vacuum for years. Recently, they have been at the forefront of covering protests on their campuses and tensions within their administrations, and currently comprise nearly 10% of statehouse reporters across the country. In 2023, student reporters from the University of Florida broke news of \$300,000 being spent on a pool for then-incoming university president and former U.S. Senator Ben Sasse. A student journalist at the University of Missouri did a deep dive into the lack of high-speed internet in rural parts of the state, which led to the passage

of legislation to create a rural broadband development fund. These are just a fraction of the local stories that student journalists broke; in fact, student reporters in statehouse roles produced over 1,000 stories for 1,200 media outlets in 2022.

Some newsrooms, for example, have already started integrating younger voices into their coverage. Teen Vogue has hired seven student journalists in battleground states to be election correspondents, and The Boston Globe recently partnered with American University students to produce a video on issues important to young voters during the New Hampshire primary. Boston University students covered the New Hampshire primary with livestreams and social media takeovers to center young voters in their coverage.

“Our student correspondents program is an effort to prioritize their voices in this year’s electoral mess. Young people are constantly targeted by both parties, especially in swing states, during election years, and we know that our coverage will be more useful to our readers if it’s written by reporters who understand the circumstances they’re living in,” says Lex McMenamin, news and politics editor at Teen Vogue. (Disclaimer: I contribute to Teen Vogue’s tech coverage.)

We need more of this. More legacy news outlets should follow a similar model and partner with college newsrooms so that they can produce coverage on issues that center young voices. The New York Times, for example, could partner with student journalists from CUNY to provide more coverage aimed at younger

PREVIOUS SPREAD: KENNEDY COX FOR NIEMAN REPORTS

voters. Or in Georgia, where 21 counties have no local news source — and 116 others have only one — The Spectator at Valdosta State and The West Georgian at the University of West Georgia could help expand The Atlanta Journal-Constitution’s election reporting. The same could be said for Texas, the second most populous state, which has over 20 counties without their own local newspaper. Student journalists in the University of Texas system could work with the Austin American-Statesman or the Houston Chronicle to better report on young voters in the state.

Universities and foundations should also support student newsrooms in their coverage by providing more funding and resources. During the 2020 election, the Solutions Journalism Network provided The Daily Tar Heel, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill’s student newspaper, with a grant focused on election reporting and young voters. The paper was able to reach readers through text messages, social media surveys, and digital voter guides. That same year, North Carolina saw a 10 percent bump in youth voter turnout, according to Tufts researchers. As philanthropic organizations ramp up their support of local news organizations through initiatives like Press Forward, some of that money could go to student outlets, especially in election years when on-the-ground coverage is crucial to helping communities understand the stakes.

“I think it’s really important to have a balance, to offer a perspective from someone from an older generation who can speak to broader historical trends, but then also including the voice of young people who are on the

ground, talking with their peers on a day-to-day basis or are feeling the firsthand impacts of whatever the issue may be, whether that’s gun violence or climate change, or just life affordability and the cost of rent, or reproductive health care access, you can go down the list,” says Rachel Janfaza, founder of The Up & Up, a newsletter that covers youth politics and Gen Z voters. “I think when you’re talking about how an issue impacts young people, it’s really important to make sure you’re actually including young people in the storytelling.”

Recognizing that younger voters historically participate at lower rates than other demographics, the role of student journalists is paramount in creating a more engaged and informed electorate. The proximity of student journalists to large groups of young voters, coupled with the ability to strategically use social media, positions student journalists as key to crafting compelling stories on issues young people care about. In my own experiences as a student journalist, I learn a lot about what matters the most to my peers just by going to club meetings, having classroom conversations, and observing demonstrations on campus. This, in turn, helps me write stories that are more relevant and tailored to my classmates and allows me to reach them better.

As the election unfolds, it is imperative to take note of the crucial role student journalists can play in shaping a more inclusive, informed, and participatory political discourse for the younger generation. News outlets can help by giving student reporters a seat at the table. ■

**This spread:** American University students working with The Boston Globe talked to young voters in New Hampshire about reproductive rights, the economy, and the rates of incarceration for people of color.

# HELPING THE HAVE-NOTS

Many small news nonprofits feel overlooked by funders. A new coalition is giving them a voice.

BY SOPHIE CULPEPPER



Here's a question I bet you can't answer without Googling: What's *Didelphis virginiana*? And what does *Didelphis virginiana* have to do with local news? I couldn't have answered either question five months ago. But last fall, when I interviewed Corinne Colbert, she introduced me to her publication, the Athens County Independent. That's how I learned that *Didelphis virginiana* is an opossum — "America's only native marsupial." It's also the species of the Independent's mascot, Scoop, "because its characteristics are a good match for ours," as the Independent's website explains:



**One of a kind.** Opossums are America's only native marsupial. Like us, they are homegrown and unique!

**Resistant to poison.** Opossums are highly resistant to rabies and immune to most snake venom. You won't see us foaming at the mouth or falling prey to insidious influence, either.

**Fighting parasites.** Opossums are tick-eating machines, eliminating bloodsucking, disease-carrying parasites. We counteract misinformation and BS that infects our public conversation.

**Keeping it clean.** Opossums are scavengers, vital to maintaining a clean environment. By monitoring power, we shine a light into the darkest corners of public institutions—and spotlight the good stuff, too.

**Highly adaptive.** Opossums are highly adaptable to changes in habitat. We're proof that good journalism can thrive anywhere!



Scoop, like any good character, has a dramatic origin story. The Independent is the phoenix that rose from the ashes of Colbert being fired as editor of The Athens News in early 2022 after reporting on the publication's own suspect advertising practices. Through a crowdfunding campaign, she raised about \$18,000 to start a nonprofit news outlet; by "late spring," community foundation grants had brought Colbert and her founding team up to nearly \$50,000. The Independent, where Colbert is editor-in-chief, published its first story in August 2022.

Athens County, Ohio, where Colbert has lived for decades, is home to Ohio University (OU) and has a total population around 60,000. The Independent covers issues that affect residents' day-to-day lives, such as efforts to revamp a community park and local restaurant reviews. It publishes who made honor roll (as community-submitted content) and a calendar of community events. But it also acts as a watchdog on different levels, reporting on candidates for office and keeping an eye on OU and other local institutions. The digital nonprofit newsroom recently covered developments in a case about university liability for its former police officer's abuse of a minor, and, in some of the Independent's most-read early coverage, tracked controversies at Hocking College, a local community college. All of its reporting is free to read.

The Independent is young, but its 2022 impact report makes a compelling case for the publication's community and civic value. Per that report, because of its news coverage, 20% of readers reported attending a public meeting, 26% voted in an election, and 46% attended a community event. More than 80% of readers said it was extremely or very important that the

Independent's coverage is "free to all"; more than 90% reported high levels of trust in its reporting; and close to 100% said they prioritized the publication being "locally owned and operated."

Despite the community support Colbert and the Independent team have generated, with a gross revenue of about \$139,000 for 2023, they're still far from where they want to be. The outlet's staff currently comprises Colbert, two staff writers, and a creative director, plus two interns. Paying a roughly five-person staff full-time plus benefits (the Independent doesn't currently offer health benefits), and adding development and sales staff, would cost "upwards of \$450,000 per year," per the 2022 impact report. That's a scale Colbert hopes to achieve within the next year or two; eventually, she wants to "hit a staff of 10," she told me, which "would bring our payroll line alone to about \$600k" with a salary floor of \$35,000.

The challenge? Not only is Athens County small; it's not particularly affluent. The median household income is about \$49,000. So the Independent has looked to the national level for additional support, applying for grants and reaching out to "big players" like the Knight Foundation and the American Journalism Project.

That hasn't worked out so far: "Basically the message we get is that we are too new and too small," Colbert told me.

**T**hat anecdotal experience speaks to a fundamental challenge for small community news outlets well beyond the Independent. Research on the nonprofit news sector suggests that smaller outlets get less money from foundations than larger ones.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: ILLUSTRATION BY DAN ZEDEK

Jason Pramas has called for philanthropic organizations to distribute funding more equitably.



“Foundations are funneling more donations to larger, more established state and regional outlets,” according to the Institute for Nonprofit News’ 2023 Index survey. The same survey found local outlets see few foundation dollars compared to the funding received by national or global news organizations. (As Colbert put it, “we get proportionately less major philanthropy than the Texas Tribunes and ProPublicas of the world.”) But foundation revenue is still a key part of these small outlets’ lifeblood — INN also found that “local outlets derive 45% of their total revenue from foundation grants,” including locally based philanthropy.

Scrappy labors of civic love like the Independent are, increasingly, popping up in communities across the country. Colbert is part of a wave of journalists and citizens trying to rebuild local news as a community-supported public resource by launching nonprofit news outlets, especially as many for-profit legacy news outlets have been squeezed and decimated by their owners. For a sense of scale: INN found that the number of local nonprofits “more than doubled in six years,” with 81 outlets launching “since rapid growth began in 2017” (that’s more than one per month). Medill’s 2023 State of Local News report said that 33% of digital local news sites are nonprofit, as well as 80% of state and regional sites; 40% of sites that are five years old or older are nonprofits.

Some of these nonprofits, like The Texas Tribune (launched in 2009) and The Baltimore Banner (launched in 2022), are backed by millions of dollars and big names; others are one-woman or one-man shows. But for large and small nonprofits alike, INN has been a key supporter of growth and momentum, especially through NewsMatch, its marathon two-month annual national matching campaign to support nonprofit news.

Despite this explosive growth, it’s a tough road for even the most successful nonprofits, as the Texas Tribune’s first-ever layoffs last summer demonstrate. Reporters and publishers I talked to from eight different newsrooms founded between 2009 and 2022 — based in California, Massachusetts, Nevada, Rhode Island, Michigan, New Hampshire, and Ohio, in rural, urban, and small-town communities alike — described similar challenges securing funding and attention from national funders, which compound the physical and psychological burden of being perpetually overworked and underpaid. Most of these eight nonprofits have annual budgets under \$200,000, and one true shoestring publication reported revenue and expenses under \$10,000 for 2022. All have budgets under \$500,000.

These journalists say that more foundation money should flow directly to newsrooms — especially the smallest, community-based, homegrown newsrooms — in the form of direct, unrestricted operating funding. That’s why they’ve joined the new Alliance of Nonprofit News Outlets (ANNO), a “no dues, no staff, no board, and no office” association launched last August with 17 founding member outlets. More newsrooms, including the Athens County Independent, have signed on since. ANNO’s member ranks recently

climbed to 36 publications, founded anywhere from the aughts to last year.

ANNO newsrooms have found that they have more of a voice by banding together: Since last summer, before officially launching, publishers from ANNO newsrooms have held conversations with multiple large journalism funders to give their perspective on what they need in the trenches of keeping their outlets alive — and how philanthropy can better, and more equitably, support them.

It’s an especially timely effort because funders say now is the moment to pull out all the stops to attempt to save local news. Through the Press Forward initiative announced last fall, a coalition of big and small players in American philanthropy led by the MacArthur Foundation are attempting to inject at least \$500 million into revitalizing local news over the next five years, with some making their first-ever foray into funding journalism (though Press Forward aims to support “nonprofit, public, and for-profit news” alike).

EcoRI News publisher and founding ANNO member Joanna Detz told me that ANNO’s goal, as much as anything, is for members “to be seen as a legitimate part

of the nonprofit news sector, worthy of direct support, which we desperately need.”

**W**hen Jason Pramas began the outreach to newsrooms that would form the foundation for ANNO, he was coming from a place of desperation and frustration after facing crushing financial pressure during the pandemic.

Pramas has run multiple news organizations. In 2022, he was executive editor of the commercial alt-weekly DigBoston and the executive director of the Boston Institute of Nonprofit Journalism (BINJ). Covid-19 hit both outlets hard; Pramas told me DigBoston lost all of its advertising support twice during the pandemic, in March 2020 and April 2022. Barely two months after the second loss, a key funder of BINJ delayed its grant distribution by six months, from June to December, forcing Pramas and two colleagues off-salary for some of that interim. (Pramas still runs BINJ. DigBoston shut down in June 2023.)

During that grim summer, Pramas resorted to what he called a “Hail Mary.” In July 2022, he published an essay titled “Share and Share Alike” calling for ma-

ior funders to distribute money equally to all nonprofit news outlets.

“I’m basically saying, there are haves and have-nots in the nonprofit journalism space. And this isn’t right,” said Pramas, who has worked in nonprofit journalism for more than 15 years. While he believes funders have good intentions, in his view, larger nonprofit outlets like ProPublica are more appealing to funders and, in addition to receiving more money from them directly, get “the better deals” from funding available through membership in journalism support groups (sometimes called intermediaries) like INN and the Local Independent Online News Publishers (LION). Meanwhile, “the rest of us are sort of ... made to engage in gladiatorial combat with each other for the scarce resources on offer, which are the crumbs from the table of these funders,” he told me.

Pramas organized an email listserv and invited thousands of nonprofit publishers to join to discuss these issues; by early September, the listserv had about 140 members, he said. (Disclosure: I first met Pramas on a Google Meet call that fall, when I was the only full-time reporter for the nonprofit Lexington Observer — I did not join this



“I’m basically saying, there are haves and have-nots in the nonprofit journalism space. And this isn’t right.”

JASON PRAMAS, ANNO founder



**Corinne Colbert launched the Athens County Independent in Ohio after being fired from her position at The Athens News for reporting on the publication's suspect advertising practices.**

listserv, and LexObserver is not an ANNO member.) About 30 of the most active members met in smaller groups via Zoom and agreed on two points: a need for more journalism funding (they were already hearing rumblings of Press Forward), and a need for, specifically, general operating funding — not just project-based funding — that they said should be distributed directly to newsrooms, instead of filtering down through intermediaries.

Twenty-three of these organizations ultimately signed an open letter that they sent to 17 medium and large funders in May 2023. “We note with alarm the fact that the funding on offer for outlets like ours — already established and actively publishing in news deserts or incipient news deserts — is woefully insufficient for the task at hand,” they wrote. “And we believe that one important reason for that growing problem is because of the received wisdom in the foundation world over the last 15+ years that providing direct operational support to nonprofit news outlets is bad practice.” They invited each foundation to join a con-

versation about how funding systems could better sustain smaller, mostly local outlets like theirs.

By July, some of the newsrooms had met with about five funders, including the MacArthur Foundation and the American Journalism Project, both organizations confirmed to me separately. (Karen Rundlet, the new CEO and executive director of INN as of January and previously senior director of the Knight Foundation’s journalism program, also confirmed to me that she met with ANNO members while at Knight.) These conversations were “very cordial, very good,” Pramas said. The nonprofit outlets, he said, started to feel as if their concerns were truly being heard; they also learned more about the very real limitations smaller funders faced in funding newsrooms directly.

ANNO officially launched the following month. “It was evident that we needed an organization to represent the interests of nonprofit news outlets by continuing to apply pressure on funders for the long

haul,” Pramas wrote in a statement in August.

ANNO’s current members are a varied bunch. While most are digital-only or digital-focused, they include a handful of print publications. Reporting-wise, a couple have more of an alt-weekly, alternative spirit, but the majority focus on local or community journalism, whether on the town, city, county, regional, or state level.

Geographically, ANNO members hail from 15 different states, but more than a third (11) are based in either Massachusetts or Rhode Island. Those organizations included, more than half (17) of ANNO outlets are based in the Northeast, but the alliance does comprise outlets from across the country — other member organizations are based in the West and Midwest, with just two from the South. Though the majority of ANNO’s members are smaller, local newsrooms, a few are national and international nonprofits. Pramas said that what unites most of these newsrooms is a sense that they are “out groups,” which are further removed from “big money and elite networks” than the outlets they see as “in groups.”

Dana Amihere is the founder and executive director of AfroLA, one of the only Black-led newsrooms to join ANNO. Amihere decided to join after hearing about the coalition in a newsletter and having a virtual conversation with Pramas in November. “I joined because I thought it was a group of people who were like-minded in how we perceive industry organizations,” she told me. “We weren’t afraid to really confront some of the deficiencies and the issues that we see as problematic within these industries. And I saw them going about it in a very targeted way. And I think that was appealing to me.”

That being said, in some ways, Amihere wryly observed that ANNO borders on too scrappy, out of its (in her view, admirable) commitment to the “no dues, no staff, no board, and no office” purity. “They have this feistiness; they have some fight,” she reflected. “But I feel like it’s more like a scrappy militia than a full-fledged army. And I don’t know that that’s enough to win the war here.”

Colbert told me that more than anything, ANNO has given her a new level of voice. “It’s one thing for the American Journalism Project, or Report for America, or whatever, to talk to Corinne Colbert at the Athens County Independent — one outlet that serves 53,000 people,” she said. “It’s another thing for them to talk with members of an organization who represent many outlets that serve many people. ... Some of the ideas, some of the ways that people talk about funding news aren’t necessarily going to work in small markets.”

ANNO has also become a place for these newsrooms to have candid conversations among themselves, especially via their “very lively” Google group, Colbert added.

“The ANNO discussion has been really robust and interesting, and much more real than I’ve gotten anywhere else,” said Dr. Alice Dreger, a historian and the founder of member-outlet East Lansing Info. (She’s also an advisory board member at The Shoestring, another Massachusetts-based ANNO member). “It’s places like the ANNO list where I’m hearing the real stories, because nobody’s afraid of offending the funders.”

Last fall, Dreger stepped away from the outlet she’d poured her life into for a decade. She has not, however,

left local news behind. She’s working on a book about local news, and in January, she launched a newsletter called “Local News Blues” that brings some of the frank conversations she’s having with local journalists for her research into the open — in some ways, in a very similar spirit to ANNO.

Now that Dreger has left East Lansing Info, she feels more at liberty to candidly critique “the big powers in local news,” she told me.

“It’s become clear to me over the last five years that local news producers are often worried about publicly speaking the truth about the industry itself,” she wrote in the first newsletter edition. “Part of that comes from being unsure that anyone cares what they have to say or that their own experiences are anything like others’. But part of it comes from the fear of biting the hands that feed us with grants and moral support.”

**M**embership in ANNO doesn’t at all preclude membership in other, much bigger journalism networks. About three-quarters of ANNO members are also INN members, and slightly fewer are also LION members. ANNO explicitly emphasizes that it does not exist to compete with INN or LION: “We just feel that those groups lack a core mandate to ensure that as much funder money as possible is flowing to the huge number of smaller news organizations that need it most.”

All eight members of ANNO that I interviewed are INN members. Almost across the board, these newsrooms have benefited from resources offered by the Institute for Nonprofit News — especially NewsMatch, INN’s matching program born in the aftermath of the 2016 election. But some publishers feel that INN can make it harder to have direct conversations with funders, and for funders’ dollars to reach their newsrooms, because they say funders default to working through INN instead of going directly to their outlets.

Joe McCarthy, the publisher and chief revenue officer of the Sierra Nevada Ally and an ANNO member, is grateful to INN. “All the work they do, their heart’s in the right place,” he said. In his experience meeting with funders through ANNO, he reflected, “those organizations are very comfortable giving to third-party organizations that provide services — taking nothing away from those organizations, which do a fabulous job for all of us.”

“But,” McCarthy added, “if that’s their traditional way of giving or allocating a lot of [their] funds ... it’s still going to be hard for us to survive.”

While some ANNO members perceive INN as a kind of gatekeeper, separating them from funders, INN sees itself as a crucial link between funders and newsrooms.

In one conspicuous way, INN helps bring its member newsrooms some direct unrestricted operating funds each year. In fact, for many nonprofit newsrooms, NewsMatch is the single most important fundraiser of the year. And, as former INN executive director and CEO Sue Cross sees it, INN actually helps direct funder dollars to small newsrooms that funders wouldn’t indi-



**“It’s places like the ANNO list where I’m hearing the real stories, because nobody’s afraid of offending the funders.”**

**ALICE DREGER, ELI founder**

RICH-JOSEPH FACUN FOR NIEMAN REPORTS



**“NewsMatch is great. It just gets smaller and smaller every year, as more newsrooms join INN.”**

**JOANNA DETZ,  
EcoRI News  
publisher**

vidually have the bandwidth to vet and award grants otherwise. (I interviewed Cross for this story in December 2023: Cross had served as INN’s executive director since 2015, but stepped down at the end of 2023. Rundlet took the helm of INN on Jan. 8, and answered questions for this story over email this month.)

Since 2016, INN, and NewsMatch, have been transformed by the scale of their growth. In the program’s first year, the Knight Foundation provided \$1.5 million in matching funds, which was distributed to 57 nonprofit newsrooms across the country. Today, nearly 20 national funders contribute about \$7 million to NewsMatch, and several hundred local and regional funders contribute millions more, which is divided among more than 300 newsrooms.

Two things are true here. One: NewsMatch has been a game-changing success for the nonprofit news industry, and a godsend, in particular, for small newsrooms. Two: Newsrooms that have been participating in NewsMatch since its earlier years, like ANNO members EcoRI News and East Lansing Info, have experienced NewsMatch’s growth as a decline in the matching funds they’ve personally received.

“Overall, NewsMatch is great,” Detz said. “It just gets smaller and smaller every year, as more newsrooms join INN.” That’s not true for everyone, but it is true, on balance, for EcoRI. The outlet received \$28,000 for the 2017 NewsMatch cycle; for the 2023 cycle, Detz expects to receive about \$16,000, including the new donor bonus, she told me.

It’s a similar story for the East Lansing Info. “NewsMatch funding has gone down as more organizations have joined INN,” Dreger and Emily Joan Elliott wrote in the outlet’s 2021 annual report. “In 2019, we obtained \$30,000 from NewsMatch; in 2020, \$22,000; and in 2021, just \$15,000. We have always hit the max for which we are eligible, but the fact is that, year by year, the importance of local support has risen steadily.”

Cross acknowledged that while “the field is growing every year ... you don’t have a tripling, a quadrupling in the number of journalism funders that are national foundations.” She also emphasized that INN sees the local fundraising component of NewsMatch as the more important marker of its success.

“The real success metric out of NewsMatch is never going to be the size of the national match — that’s the starting point, that’s the catalyst, that’s the spark” for local fundraising, she told me.

Rundlet, similarly, told me that the fundraising to keep NewsMatch growing “is not easy work.”

“Philanthropy for journalism has become an increasingly competitive space,” she said. But as that has happened, news outlets “have also become more creative in activating local matches.” 2022 was, in fact, the first year that local NewsMatch funders outpaced national funders.

To Colbert, the local match structure of NewsMatch, and other funding initiatives, can exacerbate the economic and infrastructure inequities that already disadvantage underresourced communities — especially

more rural and small-town areas like Athens County. “If we had money for a match,” she said, “we wouldn’t need your money so much.”

Funding news in underresourced rural communities is a challenge Cross thinks about too. There can be “a little bit of magical thinking” in how funders talk about making outlets in these communities sustainable, she said. “If you only focus on sustainability — can it support itself without philanthropy? You will get a certain kind of news because there are news types that are sustainable, and they tend to either go where there’s wealth, or where money is generated, like covering tech, covering business, covering real estate, or to the most entertaining [coverage] ... or you’ll see a lot of fear mongering in local broadcast, or a lot of crime coverage that people get addicted to out of fear.”

For newsrooms serving less affluent areas, small communities in rural areas, and communities of color, and especially for local investigative reporting, “we are going to need ongoing philanthropy beyond what can be raised locally,” Cross said. At the same time, “if you look at the scope of need, I don’t think it’s realistic to expect we’re going to have national funding that can spread across the scale of the reinvention of journalism,” she added. “It has to spread to enable every newsroom to build that locally.”

Rundlet pointed to specific bonuses built into NewsMatch’s structure as a way that the program attempts to give additional match opportunities to the communities that need them the most. The campaign includes bonus funds “designed to serve organizations led by people of color and that serve audiences of color” as well as “for particular geographies,” she told me.

**I**NN is a big tent. Its 425-plus members reflect the variety in the nonprofit news sector, including national heavyweights and tiny hyperlocals alike. Rundlet told me that local newsrooms “are the fastest growing segment of the INN membership.” The median revenue per INN member outlet is about \$475,000, according to the 2023 Index, while the median revenue for local outlets is \$271,000. Members pay dues on a sliding scale based on annual revenue, from \$150 for newsrooms with revenue under \$50,000, to \$1,000 for newsrooms with revenue at or exceeding \$2 million.

Some of the eight ANNO members I spoke with — who almost all have budgets much smaller than both of those medians — say that INN is set up to serve some larger members better than it serves them. Before the Athens County Independent joined ANNO, Colbert felt “a little disappointed and frustrated” with INN because she did not see many of its offerings as relevant to her newsroom. As an example, she pointed to a wealth screening resource INN offers to help members identify donors who could contribute major gifts. For INN to complete the screening, the INN member must first compile and submit a “prospect list” with as much detailed donor contact and personal information as possible.

Colbert told me she can’t take time off from report-

ing to create that list. “I don’t have a week to comb the internet for all of that data,” she said, “so it’s a great tool that I can’t access.”

Cross acknowledged that not all INN resources are suited to all INN members, though she said INN tries to ensure there is a “critical mass” for any training they do provide. From INN’s perspective, putting money toward shared services helps it go further, in the big picture. For instance, giving money to each individual member newsroom for wealth screening, Cross said, would be “much harder because we can centrally contract more cheaply.”

In Rundlet’s first month as INN’s executive director, she said she’s seen that “INN is evolving its programs and services to meet member needs, including the smaller startups.” One recent example she pointed to: A member reached out about offering health insurance to their sole employee. Since INN has a special negotiated rate with JustWorks, a company that offers group health insurance for members with as few as two employees, INN’s services manager is working with the company to figure out “what might be possible for a one-person shop,” Rundlet said.

Cross told me that small local newsrooms’ “needs do differ for sure” from the needs of other INN members, and “they are among the highest users of INN services,” especially audience development resources.

INN operates under the belief that a big-tent identity allows bigger and more established newsrooms to support smaller and newer outlets, from sharing fundraising tips to partnering on reporting. “Part of the value of the network being a big tent is that ProPublica and the other major national players just contribute so much,” Cross said. “They contribute more to other INN members than they get out of INN membership.” Smaller outlets, she said, can and do use INN’s listserv to ask questions that bigger outlets respond to — “a lot of what INN does ... is facilitating that knowledge exchange,” Cross added, citing an instance where several members shared their memoranda of understandings on INN’s listservs, allowing other organizations to use them as



DYLAN LEES PHOTOGRAPHY/COURTESY OF ALICE DREGER

templates, potentially saving them the cost and time of hiring a lawyer.

For INN to better serve newsrooms like hers, Colbert believes that smaller, bootstrapped newsrooms need more direct representation among INN leadership. She ran, unsuccessfully, for INN’s board of directors last October.

She’s not the only one thinking that way. Amihere, of AfroLA, also ran unsuccessfully for INN’s board in that cycle, though unlike Colbert, she was a designated “recommended candidate.” At the time, AfroLA had not yet joined ANNO; the newsroom joined about a month later.

When Amihere ran for INN’s board, she told me she

**Alice Dreger, founder of ELI, stepped away from the outlet she created after working past the point of physical exhaustion and donating more than \$100,000 of her and her spouse’s money.**

Dana Amihere, founder of AfroLA, joined ANNO after hearing about it in a newsletter. AfroLA remains one of the few Black-led newsrooms in the coalition.



COURTESY OF DANA AMIHERE



This is Part I of a two-part series, “‘Haves and have-nots’ in nonprofit news? The view from small news outlets.” In Part II, which you can read online by scanning the QR code above, funders, publishers, and leaders from INN and LION share their perspectives on some of the patterns in philanthropy that lead to small newsrooms being left behind.

was concerned with three aspects of representation on the top body: a lack of grassroots local news experience; inadequate demographic diversity; and a lack of age diversity, with members skewing older. Since she ran, Amihere feels the board’s representation has advanced “maybe a half-step in the right direction,” she told me.

Today, only one of INN’s 11 board members actively leads a small, hyperlocal organization at all comparable to AfroLA or the Athens County Independent — Ron Smith, of the Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service (which is fiscally sponsored by, and receives some financial support from, Marquette). While multiple board members have previous experience in local news, and the board does include one other seat held by a state-level local news outlet leader (Adams of the Montana Free Press), as of Fiscal Year 2022, the MFP’s budget exceeded \$1 million — making it much larger than most ANNO newsrooms.

**A**t the heart of some journalists’ frustration with INN is a sense that the organization belongs to a different world — a world characterized by, from their perspective, glossy boardrooms and “bacon-wrapped” conferences, Dreger said.

“There are a lot of us who are grumpy,” Dreger said. “And it’s not that the people of INN aren’t great people trying to do great work ... it feels like they’re kind of a shiny thing on the top of the mountain. And we are farming in shitty soil.”

“People feel stressed out, always on the verge of collapse,” she continued. “And when INN announces that they’ve created another position for themselves, or they’re having another sort of fancy initiative, a lot of the people who are doing that farming in shitty soil feel like, ‘Oh, my God, just give me the money.’”

I spoke with Dreger for this story in October 2023, which was the same month she stepped back from East Lansing Info. Her explanation of why she left gives texture and credibility to what it means to “farm in shitty soil”:

For years, I’ve been working past the point of physical exhaustion. At ELi, at various times, I’ve been publisher, executive director, managing editor, city desk editor, assistant editor, lead investigative reporter, development director, book-keeper, and on and on. Conservatively speaking, I put in over a half-million dollars in unpaid labor in addition to the over \$100,000 my spouse and I have donated in cash to bring East Lansing news.

But a lot of the burnout has to do with the psychological cost of bringing local news in a small town, something I think too few people outside serious local journalism understand. I am told I look exceptionally tough. The truth is that there have been many stories that have made me incredibly stressed out or sad to have to report.

This window into what it was like for Dreger to run ELi helps explain why she and Pramas both specifically pointed to INN’s executives earning six figures as a

source of resentment and suspicion for some ANNO members. As Dreger said, some of those compensation packages are bigger than the annual budgets of the smallest hyperlocals. “Is it appropriate, when we’re in the current environment that we’re in, to ... have a lot of executives at INN being paid gobsmaacking amounts of money compared to the budgets that we all have?” she asked. “It makes for a very uncomfortable situation.”

Amihere has a slightly different perspective. “I can see both sides of it,” she told me. For one thing, she noted that the cost of living varies drastically depending on where people are based. Generally, “we’re thinking, as local news organizations ... of where we are, and how far money goes where we live,” she said, making for some apples-and-oranges comparisons. “I don’t want to sit here and say that no news executives should make six figures or beyond — I don’t want to say that because I don’t think it’s true.”

The problem, she said, isn’t so much that INN executives are overpaid; it’s that people like her are drastically underpaid, and the contrast is galling. “As a leader of AfroLA, my work is sure as hell worth \$100,000,” she told me. “I mean, you don’t work 75 hours a week and expect to get paid 50K. It’s just not OK.”

“The reason people are angry,” she said, is this disparity is “a symptom of our own industry’s problems.” And the problems are baked in so deep, structurally, that no one person can fix this — “even one person near the top, or at the top.”

**I**n November 2022, ProPublica founder Dick Tofel wrote a much-discussed essay where he questioned whether journalism intermediaries like INN, LION Publishers, News Revenue Hub, and others were getting too much foundation money.

“I am increasingly worried when I observe what I see as the increasing fragility of many nonprofit newsrooms juxtaposed with the robust growth of the intermediaries whose mission is to support them,” Tofel wrote, arguing for more funding to go directly to newsrooms. The piece provoked enough response — much of it critical — that he wrote a second newsletter edition rounding up some commentary.

A year later, “I certainly agree that more grants directly to newsrooms make sense,” Tofel told me in an email in November. “With respect to the reality on the ground in 2023, I don’t think anyone could seriously disagree that the intermediaries are generally growing at a significantly faster pace than are the run of the newsrooms they ostensibly serve.”

To be clear, ANNO members don’t necessarily want to see INN defunded, nor do they think that giving all of INN’s funding to newsrooms would magically make them sustainable.

“I don’t want INN to be shortchanged in order ... [for funding to flow] directly to us smaller guys,” McCarthy said. “We want to be equally funded.”

Cross understands the desire for more direct funding. “If I was running a local newsroom, I would be doing everything I can to get direct funding,” Cross said.



“You don’t work 75 hours a week and expect to get paid 50K. It’s just not OK.”

DANA AMIHERE, AfroLA founder

## NIEMAN NOTES

### 1984

**Derrick Z. Jackson** was awarded best reported essay by the American Society of Journalists and Authors for his article, “We Saved the Puffins, Now a Warming Planet is Unraveling that Work,” published in *Grist*.

### 1989

**Rod Nordland**, most recently an international correspondent at large for *The New York Times*, has written his second book, “Waiting for the Monsoon” (Mariner Books, March 5). His poignant memoir reflects on his life as a war correspondent, mended relationships, and his ongoing battle with terminal brain cancer, an illness he says became “a gift that has enriched my life.”

### 2004

**Masha Gessen**, author, *New Yorker* staff writer, and distinguished professor at the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism, received the Hannah Arendt Prize for Political Thought in Germany in December. Earlier that month, Russia issued an arrest warrant for Gessen for allegedly spreading false information about the Russian army.

### 2007

**Ian Johnson**, author, researcher, and senior fellow for China Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, recently launched the China Unofficial Archives, a nonpartisan repository for books, samizdat magazines, and films.

### 2008

**Gaiutra Bahadur** was the University of Cambridge’s inaugural Ramesh and Leela Narain Visiting Fellow, the first dedicated to indentureship studies. She is an associate professor of journalism and English at Rutgers University-Newark.

### 2009

**Ernie Suggs**, race reporter for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, recently worked as a writer for “The South Got Something to Say,” a new documentary on Atlanta’s impact on hip hop.

**Tommy Tomlinson**, writer and host of the podcast “SouthBound,” is author of the forthcoming “Dogland: Passion, Glory, and

Lots of Slobber at the Westminster Dog Show” (Simon & Schuster, April 23). It’s the first inside account of the oldest dog show in America.

### 2013

**Jen Balderama**, senior editor for *The Atlantic*, edited work that won a 2023 Gerald Loeb Award for Commentary. The coverage, by columnist Alyssa Rosenberg, reported on the infant formula shortage in the U.S.

**Debra Adams Simmons** has been named senior director of editorial projects, a new role at GBH. She will help create and develop content, working with and across GBH brands as well as external partners. She previously worked at National Geographic, where she was executive editor for history and culture and also served as vice president for diversity, equity, and inclusion.

### 2014

**Alison MacAdam** edited “The 13th Step,” a podcast about America’s addiction treatment facilities that won a DuPont Award and is a semifinalist for the 2024 Goldsmith Prize for Investigative Reporting.

### 2018

**Shalini Singh** won the Ricardo Ortega Memorial Prize Silver Medal given by the United Nations Correspondents Association, for climate stories she produced for the People’s Archive of Rural India (PARI) and her essay “Cities have to walk the central government’s talk on climate action,” published by *Question of Cities*.

**Edward Wong**, diplomatic correspondent for *The New York Times*, is author of his first book “At the Edge of Empire: A Family’s Reckoning with China” (Viking, May 28). It combines memoir and reportage spanning 80 years, from the story of his father in Mao’s army to China’s rise today. The narrative is one of *Foreign Policy*’s Most Anticipated Books of 2024.

### 2019

**Peter Nickeas** has started a new job covering criminal justice for the *Illinois Answers Project*.

**Afşin Yurdakul** is one of nine journalists selected to participate in an intensive 12-

week professional development program this spring organized by the Stigler Center’s Journalists in Residence Program at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business.

### 2020

**Rob Chaney** has started a new position overseeing statewide public service journalism projects at the *Missoulian*, where he’ll lead coverage of enterprise stories and investigations affecting Montana and the Rocky Mountain region.

### 2021

**S. Mitra Kalita**, co-founder and CEO of URL Media, co-founder and publisher of *Epicenter-NYC*, and a 2021 Visiting Nieman Fellow, has been named to American Press Institute’s board of trustees.

### 2022

**Pranav Dixit** has started a new position as a senior editor at *Engadget*, where he manages news coverage and works on his own enterprise reporting and features. He writes about the impact of technology on our lives.

**Jonathan Rabb**, founder of *Watch the Yard*, a digital platform for Black college students and alumni, has been named to *Black Enterprise*’s 40 Under 40 list.

### 2023

**Natasha Khan** started a new role as a business reporter for *The Wall Street Journal* in New York. She will cover American consumer giants, forces driving the global consumer economy and trends reshaping the industry’s best-known brands. Khan previously served as Asia correspondent for *The Journal* based in Hong Kong.

### 2024

**Manasseh Azure Awuni**, founding editor-in-chief of *The Fourth Estate*, a nonprofit investigative journalism project of the Media Foundation for West Africa in Ghana, won several awards presented by the Norbert Zongo Africa Investigative Journalism Prize in Burkina Faso. He was named Overall Best African Investigative Journalist from a group of journalists from 29 countries. He also won first prize in the television category and second prize in the online category for his work.

## Remer Tyson, NF ’67, Who Covered U.S. Politics and Major Events in Africa, died at 89

An appreciation by  
**Bill Schiller, NF ’06**

**R**emer Tyson, who spent the better part of two decades chronicling wars, famine, and freedom movements in Africa — including South Africa’s triumph over apartheid — died at his home in Harare, Zimbabwe, on Dec. 27, 2023. He was 89.

A Nieman Fellow from the class of 1967, Tyson was revered among foreign correspondents for the depth and breadth of his coverage, as well as for his generosity and mentorship of younger journalists. He filed dispatches from more than 40 countries, from Mali to Madagascar, and from Egypt to South Africa. Some were from the sharp edge of breaking events, like the battle of Mogadishu and the Rwandan genocide. But he also dedicated years to covering developing stories, like Namibia’s independence and Nelson Mandela’s heroic struggle to win his freedom.

His reputation was well-earned and well-known. When *The Carter Center* landed in Lusaka, Zambia, to monitor contentious elections in the early ’90s, Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter sought out Tyson for his take on the leaders, people, and politics at play.

Born and raised on a farm near Statesboro, Georgia, where his parents grew tobacco, cotton, and pecans, Tyson graduated from Georgia Teachers’ College and the Grady School of Journalism at the University of Georgia. His first job was at *The Valdosta Times*, but he soon won a spot at *The Atlanta Constitution* where he became a political reporter, covering his first of what would become eight presidential campaigns.

Following his Nieman fellowship, Tyson jumped to the *Detroit Free Press* in 1970, then one of the country’s top-10 circulation

**Denise Hruby**, an Austrian environment and investigative journalist, won first honorable mention in the features category from the Society of Environmental Journalists for her *New York Times* article “What’s the Correct Color of Bees? In Austria, It’s a Toxic Topic.” Through her reporting, Hruby uncovered how a



Remer Tyson started his career at *The Valdosta Times* in Georgia. He would eventually make his way to Africa, where he filed dispatches from more than 40 countries.

newspapers, and rose to become its chief political writer. Assigned to open the paper’s first Africa bureau, he returned to Harvard to study at the business school, then hit the ground running in a newly independent Zimbabwe in 1981.

In the mid-1980s, Tyson was back in Detroit as the paper’s foreign editor. But the pull to Africa remained strong, and in 1988, he returned to the continent and never left.

During his time back in Detroit, Tyson and *Free Press* reporter Billy Bowles spent summers criss-crossing the country in a beat-up Volkswagen collecting stories on some of the South’s most notorious

proposed law rooted in Nazi science would have led to the killing of billions of bees because of their dark color.

**Andrew Ryan**, an investigative reporter for *The Boston Globe*, has received the 2023 Arc of Justice Award from the New England Innocence Project for his stories

politicians. Their book, “They Love a Man in the Country,” is a rogues’ gallery of characters who shaped the South — for better and for worse — during the early parts of the 20th century. Hodding Carter, NF ’66, praised it as “a window into a world that is gone forever.”

On retiring in 1997, Tyson and his wife Virginia Curtin Knight Tyson, who wrote and edited a three-volume encyclopedia on African biography, joined the Knight Foundation to train and coach African journalists in Ghana and South Africa.

Tyson is survived by his wife, daughter Tera Elizabeth Tyson, and his sister Kay Tyson Hart. ■

on the wrongfully convicted.

**Johanna Wild**, an open-source researcher at the investigative nonprofit *Bellingcat*, and her colleagues were recently honored when the Society of Editors named *Bellingcat* the 2023 International Media Organization of the Year. ■





Jaemark Tordecilla stands in front of the Maguindanao provincial capitol in 2011.

## Standing Up to Corruption and Violence

**Jaemark Tordecilla**, NF '24, on the harassment, brutality, and financial pressures faced by journalists in the Philippines

I became a journalist in 2009 for one reason: I wanted to focus my work in a field that promoted social justice. Prior to that, I was working in technology, a much more lucrative field given the presence of foreign companies that built their offshore tech operations in the Philippines.

It was an inauspicious time to join the industry. The Committee to Protect Journalists had just named the Philippines among the worst places in the world to be a journalist, primarily due to the unsolved

murders of journalists speaking truth to power. Later that year, the Maguindanao massacre happened, claiming the lives of 58 people, including more than 30 media workers, in what remains one of the deadliest events for the press in history. It was perpetrated by the Ampatuan clan, the most powerful political family in the region.

I began my journalism career at the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ), for which I covered the aftermath of the massacre. My

stint at the PCIJ took me around the country, giving me a first-person view of the issues faced by news outlets across the Philippines. Aside from the threat of violence, there was political intimidation and legal harassment from entities seeking to influence coverage or silence critical reporting. There was also constant economic pressure as traditional revenue streams continued to decline, leaving many journalists — especially in the countryside — vulnerable to the temptations of corrupt practices.

Since then, things have only gotten worse. The government has continued to target and harass journalists. The online news site Rappler, founded by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Maria Ressa, was a target during the Duterte administration. In 2020, the country's biggest media company, ABS-CBN, saw its broadcast

license canceled by lawmakers loyal to the president, who had declared the television network an enemy. The threats aren't always political. In January 2024, CNN Philippines announced its closure after nine years following billions of pesos in mounting losses.

Meanwhile, I had been hired for leadership positions at more mainstream news organizations. In 2014, I became editor-in-chief of GMA News Online. With my background in technology, I spent nearly a decade creating strategies and new journalism platforms that allowed my team to tell stories better and reach new audiences, usually on the latest emerging platforms. We did a lot of longform reporting and digital documentaries, but we also used graphics and animations to tell stories of various lengths. We used augmented-reality filters, TikTok duets, and online games. We've also collaborated with influencers. We were even the first media outlet in the world to air our evening news live on TikTok. Ours became the most trusted news brand in the Philippines, according to the Reuters Institute's Digital News Report. In 2022, the brand had a trust score of 70% according to the study, even as "trust in news overall" languished at 37% among Filipino respondents. This tracked with our consumption data. GMA News was among the top in the world, often reaching new peaks during moments when Filipinos were most in need of news: lockdown announcements, Covid-19 surges, and elections.

Our analytics told a clear story: Filipinos in the country and abroad were hungry to find sources they could trust. But in a world of endless content, attention is the most important currency, and news organizations are no longer entitled to anything. We all need to fight for that attention every day.

Some days, we win. Any other news organization in the world would be glad to take our numbers.

Some days, we lose. A University of the Philippines study found that because of intense misinformation operations during these past elections, the reach of news outlets for political discourse is "increasingly limited to news-reading publics," with our gatekeeping function bypassed by politicians and new political actors. Much of our political reporting was not reaching these partisan communities.



Nenen Momay-Castillo is comforted by a journalist in 2010 at an event commemorating the first anniversary of the Maguindanao massacre.

Indeed, in the 2022 Philippine national elections, Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos, Jr., the son and namesake of the late dictator, won the presidency in a landslide without taking a single critical question from the biggest news organization in the Philippines.

Despite this, mainstream newsrooms in Manila remain in a relatively privileged position. Many journalists working for alternative news organizations, usually in the countryside, often face more immediate and existential threats.

Journalists like Frenchie Mae Cumpio, a regional journalist who has been accused by the government of being a rebel operative. She's currently in jail over trumped up firearms charges.

Another journalist, Lady Ann Salem, spent a year in jail. After her release, authorities went to the appeals court to try to overturn her acquittal. Then there's Juan Jumalon, aka DJ Johnny Walker, a radio broadcaster who was shot dead during a live broadcast.

The Philippines continues to be one of the worst places in the world to be a journalist. The fight is exhausting, and it's easy to feel helpless. But it's necessary.

I recently reached out to Nenen Momay-Castillo, a Filipino nurse who I met while covering the aftermath of the Maguindanao massacre. Her

father Reynaldo "Bebot" Momay, a photojournalist, was among those murdered. But his body was never found, so for a while, Castillo couldn't file a case against the murderers.

Despite that, she took a leadership role in organizing the families. She was always quick to make things light, always ready with a joke and a smile. She told me she does this advocacy because otherwise, she'd just be crying all the time.

The courts found the Ampatuans and their men guilty in 2019 on some charges relating to the massacre, but they were acquitted in the Momay case because his body was never proven to be there — all that was found were his dentures.

Castillo left the Philippines to work in the United States as a nurse, but she's still seeking justice. I reached out to her before Thanksgiving; I almost didn't realize that it was the anniversary of the massacre. She was glad to hear from me. I asked her about her kids, whom I had interviewed before, and she sent me a picture of their happy family.

She told me she couldn't thank us enough for the work we did as she sought justice for her father. And I was thinking, *I wasn't able to do anything*. But God bless her for believing that our work makes an impact, because if she believes it, then how could I possibly not? ■

## A Moment of Deep Sorrow on the U.S.-Mexico Border

### What it means to humanize the migrants coming to America

BY BARBARA DAVIDSON

**I**n January 2024, Pulitzer-Prize winning photographer Barbara Davidson traveled from her Los Angeles home to the California-Mexico border town of Jacumba. The month before, U.S. law enforcement had taken into custody a record number of migrants — more than 225,000 people — and negotiations around border security and immigration legislation ramped up ahead of the presidential primaries. Davidson wanted to put faces on the statistics in news stories about asylum seekers and witness what they face when they try to enter the U.S.

In Jacumba, Davidson met migrants from Turkey, Guatemala, China, Brazil, and Afghanistan — many of whom were making the treacherous journey through the desert with young children. She also met Suny, a man from Nepal, who had been traveling for six months alone to reach the border. Davidson spoke with Nieman Reports about her experience in Jacumba and the pictures she made there. This conversation has been edited and condensed for clarity.

I had been following the news about what was happening on the border. And I thought, “This is happening three hours from where I live. I’d really like to go and see for myself what is happening.” Around that time, fellow photographer Nick Ut and I decided to drive to Jacumba together.

We got there as the sun was rising. It was a very, very cold morning. We saw people along the side of the road with makeshift fires that they had built because they had been there all night. Some were playing chess. Some were gathered under a blue tarp, crouched down.

We drove to the area where people were actually crossing from Mexico into the United States, the area where they were

surrendering to the U.S. Border Patrol. But the town of Jacumba, where they crossed into, has a tiny population. So there isn’t enough infrastructure for the amount of people coming into the country, and it takes time to be processed by border guards.

When I met Suny, he was — for lack of a better description — at the front of line where people were surrendering to the border patrol. It’s an area where people are gathered in tents awaiting their turn to meet with agents. He was just sitting by himself and crying profoundly. It was a moment of deep sorrow. And so, I struggled with the question, “Do I make this picture? Do I not make this picture?” I thought to myself, “I’m going to make this picture, because this is a powerful moment to show the desperation and despair people are feeling when they try to come to this country.”

He looked at me as I prepared to make the photo, but he didn’t try to stop me. I approached him, and I asked him what language he spoke. He told me that he was from Nepal. I used Google Translate to communicate with him. The communication obviously was quite broken, but we got the basics. He explained to me, through tears, that he lost his passport and his phone didn’t work. He was so deep in his sorrow that it was hard to connect with him. I asked him if he had anybody that we could contact. He opened his hands, and he showed me a crumpled piece of paper. He opened it up for me very carefully. There were four or five different phone numbers on that piece of paper, and one phone number was an American number. I called the number for him.

On the other end was a gentleman from Nepal, who was living in New York. I told him what was happening. I said, “Listen,

I don’t know what your relationship is with this young man. But he’s stranded. And I think he just needs to talk to somebody to help him get through this next phase while waiting for the border guards.” I gave Suny my phone, and they had a conversation. He had someone he could talk to, and they made a plan: Suny was going to get to this man’s house in New York once he was processed.

A week after I met with Suny, I called that man from New York again and found out Suny was with him. He said, “I’m very grateful to you. Suny’s here with me now. We’re just waiting for the process.”

I wanted to get to the root of this migration. I wanted to see what it really looked and felt like on the ground. In September, I became an American citizen, and so it was very poignant for me to see the lengths to which people will go to flee their own country. Often, we just hear about the statistics on the news. You don’t really see and feel it. You don’t hear the children’s cries. While I know it’s impossible to tell every single story, I think it’s important to humanize this more than what we’re seeing.

Even when we see the coverage, we always see long lines of people. They’re anonymous. What stood out for me about this photo was it was just one lone person in the middle of the desert. But the despair on his face spoke volumes about a collective experience. Sometimes as journalists when we go smaller, it becomes more intimate. It allows our audience to have a more personal understanding of what is taking place in the desert. Suny’s journey is one story on a mass scale. ■

As told to Megan Cattel.



Suny, a migrant from Nepal, was waiting to cross the border into the United States, but his phone stopped working and he lost his passport.

