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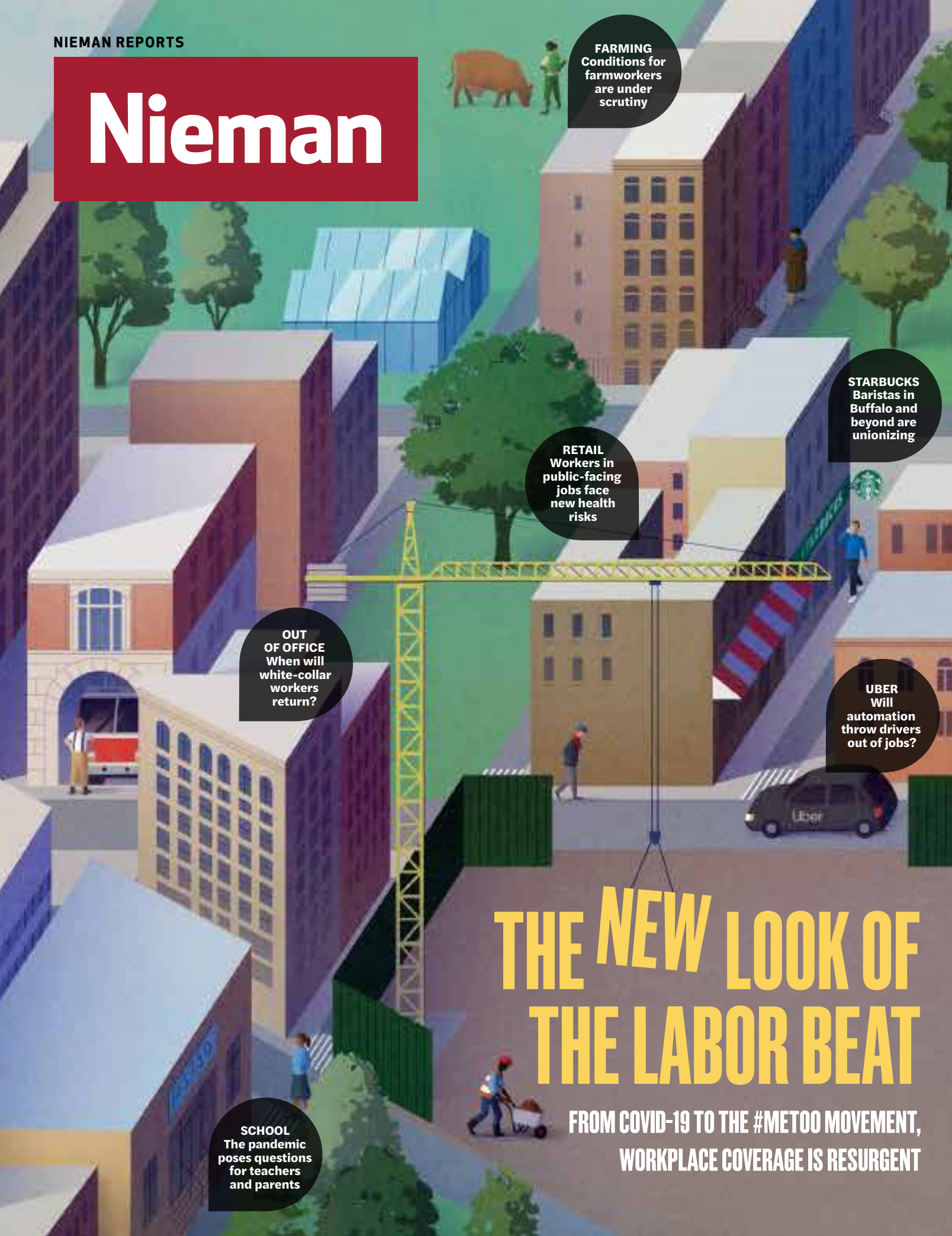

THE *NEW* LOOK OF THE LABOR BEAT

FROM COVID-19 TO THE #METOO MOVEMENT, WORKPLACE COVERAGE IS RESURGENT

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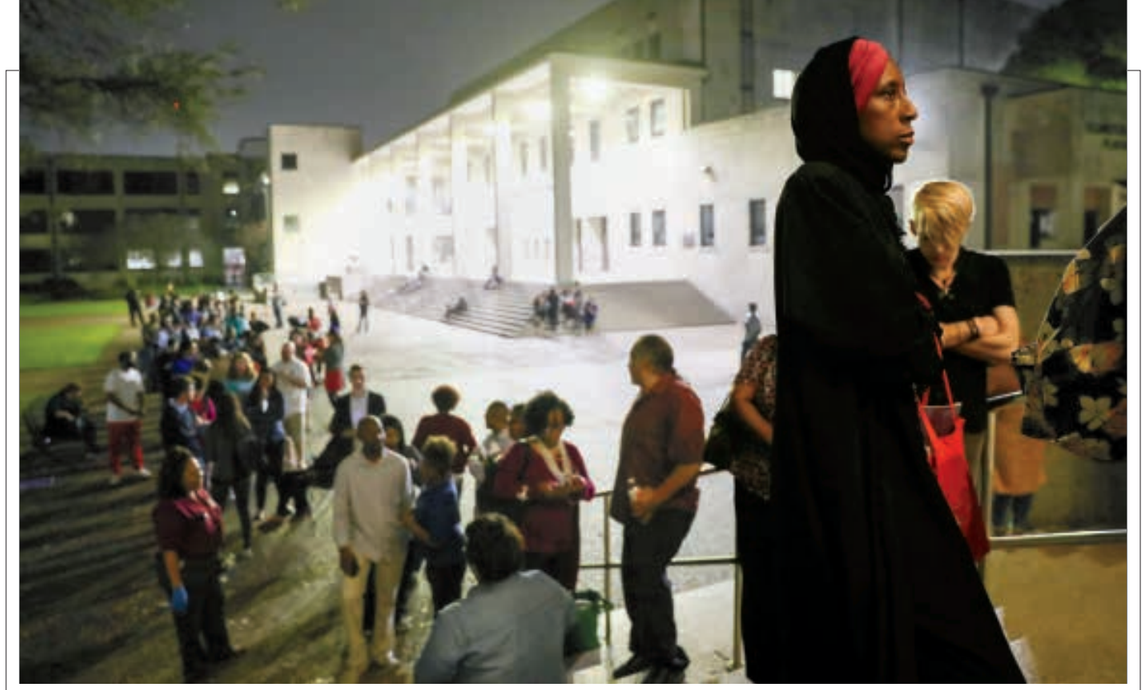

A line of voters stretched out of the Robert James Terry Library in Houston after 10 p.m. as they waited to cast their votes in March 2020 (p. 8)

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As American journalists look less like the country they cover, an alternative certification path can diversify the field (p. 18)

COVER: MICHAEL KIRKHAM; ABOVE: JON SHAPLEY/AP; ILLUSTRATION: ANDREA DESANTIS

FROM THE CURATOR

A Green Light for Corruption

Researchers say there are tangible costs when a community loses its newspaper. The question is, do we want to pay now or pay later?

BY ANN MARIE LIPINSKI

Jonas Heese was skeptical. The Harvard Business School professor had heard the standard claims: When local newspapers close down, corporate corruption goes up. Yes, there was anecdotal evidence that national media could act as a corrective — perhaps a Wall Street Journal story about fraud at a production facility that hurt a company's stock price. But Heese, a researcher of corporate crime, didn't believe local news held the same sway.

"To be honest, I was probably more on the critical side," he told me. "And even if local media can play a role, I thought maybe it's still okay if it disappears because there are other things out there that would substitute. For example, social media, or some other monitors, maybe non-profit organizations, that shed light on problems. So, I was a little bit critical."

Fueling Heese's skepticism was a classic claim about media conflict-of-interest: If local newspapers rely on area businesses for advertising and their readers work at those companies, would reporters risk their wrath by targeting the firms for investigative reporting?

"There are arguments for why local media might not be good watchdogs," Heese said. "Do you really have the incentive to go hard on those companies?"

If Heese was right, there would be little impact on the scale of corporate misconduct when a community's newspaper shuttered. So he put his skepticism to a test and, with two other colleagues, designed a study to measure malfeasance before and after 33 local newspaper closures that impacted 45 U.S. counties. Using Violation Tracker, a public database of corporate misconduct, they examined violations and penalties issued by 44 government regulatory agencies from 2000 to 2017.

I suspect you know what happened next.

When a newspaper vanished, violations at area public companies rose by 1.1 percent and financial penalties by 15 percent. Just as concerning, said Heese, the severity of the documented fraud increased in the wake of a paper's closure as measured by the size of the penalties. Toxic emissions — which companies are required to report even when they are not illegal — skyrocketed almost 20 percent after a newspaper folded.

The data examined by the researchers "captures how companies screw over their own employees, the environment, the government, or their shareholders," said Heese, and included violations such as workplace safety and discrimination, accounting fraud and over-billing, and pollution. The documented misconduct, he said, is but "the tip of the iceberg."

"This is a very conservative number because we can only capture the detected violations and we only focus on facilities of publicly-listed firms. But there are many, many other private companies that can also pollute the environment and mistreat their employees."

I asked Heese how he felt now about his early hypothesis.

"Local newspapers really seem to matter," he said. "Otherwise, we wouldn't see that effect. If it was somehow possible on average that someone else stepped up and engaged in watchdog monitoring, then we should not be able to see that increase in violations. Local newspapers play an important role as a corporate monitor."

Heese and his colleagues assert that their study provides "the first systematic evidence showing that the local press is an effective monitor of corporate misconduct." Their disappearance, he said, is "a pretty big deal."

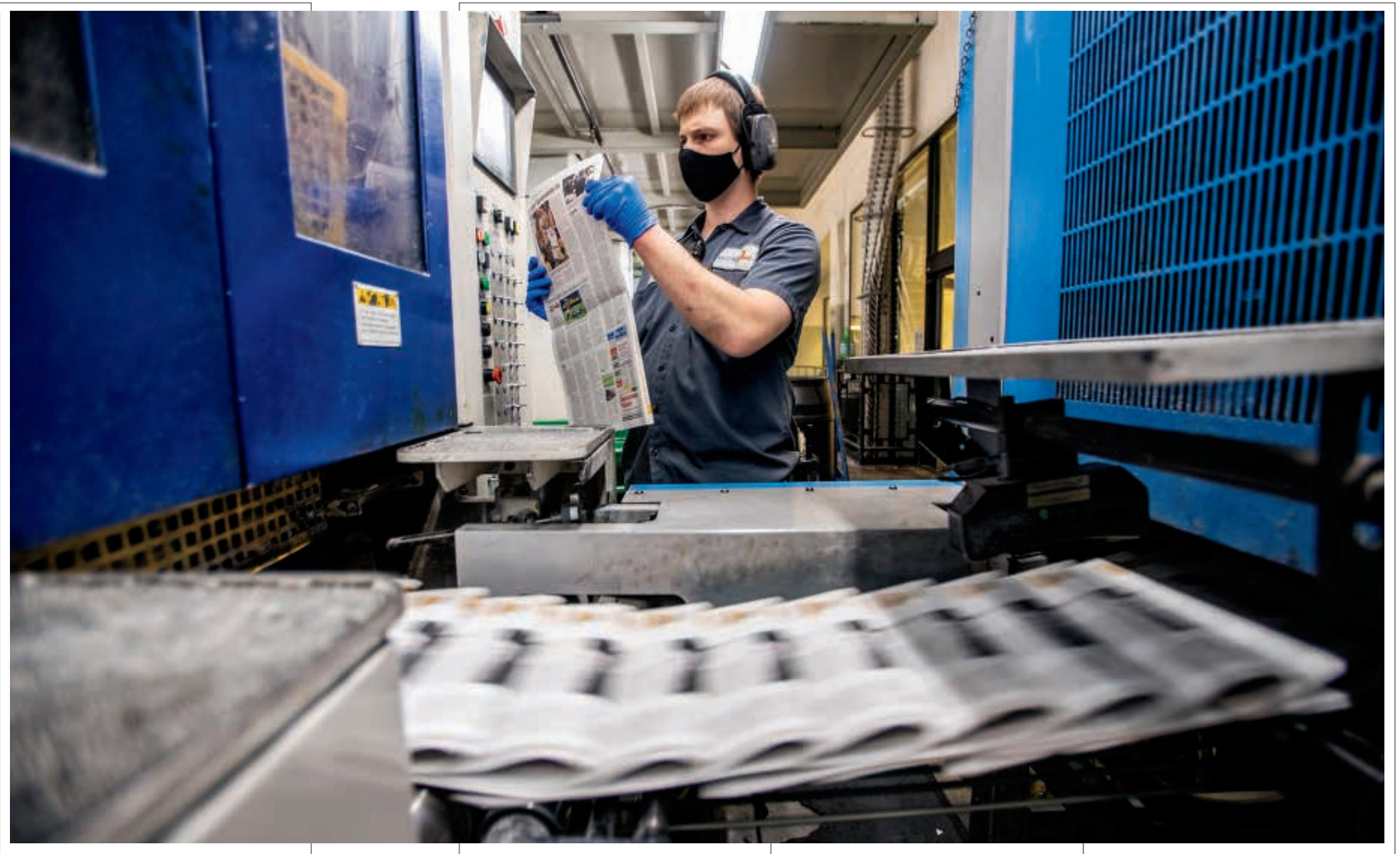
In talking with Heese about his research, I saw how closely his initial skepticism mirrored common cultural assumptions about journalism, notably a vague belief that new digital actors have stepped up to replace the dying watchdogs. As one media executive recently tweeted: "The sooner legacy newspapers are bled to death, the sooner the disruptors will take over." In the meantime, observe the flashing green light for costly corruption.

But Heese's research and his own evolution of thought also show how inadequately journalists — and I'll include myself here — have framed the stakes for our crumbling local news infrastructure. I recently participated in a public conversation about the rise of vulture investors as newspaper owners and was struck by a former reporter's insular framing of why this mattered. Here are the key words from my notes: declining headcount, furloughs, wage cuts, buyouts, small pay increases, career limits. All of this described what was happening to the newsroom. None of it described what was happening to the community. Ours is not the only industry convulsed by economic and technological challenges or beset by job loss. We need a more persuasive public case, one that centers community members as stakeholders in the fight to preserve local journalism.

We like to argue that democracy hangs in the balance, and I believe that's true. But that's a squishy argument that can be claimed by many public servants and invites criticism of journalists as self-important. More effective is emerging research on local journalism's impact on government accountability and spending. Likewise, an academic study from 2018 began to build the case that taxpayers will partly fund the cost of a shrinking local press corps, like it or not. "They found that with fewer watchdogs government salaries rise, deficits increase, and borrowing costs go up for 5 to 11 basis points," Nieman Fellow Mary Ellen Klas wrote. "In dollar terms, an additional 10 basis points increases the cost of an average bond issue by $650,000."

Research like this and like Heese's seems fundamental to sorting out the future of local news. It is tangible and persuasive in a way that newsroom furloughs and democracy debates are not. The question of government funding for local news is decidedly different if a community is already effectively taxed for its newspaper's demise through rising government salaries and corporate pollution.

It's a rare day that I don't see someone on social media complaining that a news story is behind a paywall. There's an increasing amount of evidence that we can pay now, or we can pay later. ■



SCOTT G. WINTERTON/THE DESERET NEWS VIA AP

As local coverage contracts, like the Deseret News in Utah (above), one study shows that corporate corruption increases

LIVE@
LIPPMANN

Bringing "The Emancipator" To Life

Co-editors Deborah Douglas and Amber Payne discuss building on the abolitionist paper's historical roots

In March, The Boston Globe's Opinion Team and Boston University's Center for Antiracist Research announced plans to revive The Emancipator, the first abolitionist newspaper in the United States, initially founded in the 19th century. The resurrected Emancipator aims to "amplify critical voices, ideas, and evidence-based opinion in an effort to reframe the national conversation and hasten racial justice." Its advisory board boasts some of the nation's most prominent scholars, journalists, and thinkers on racial justice, including The 1619 Project founder Nikole Hannah-Jones.

In June, The Emancipator announced that it had tapped Deborah D. Douglas and Amber Payne as its co-editors–in-chief. Prior to The Emancipator, Douglas was a journalism professor at DePauw University. She was also a senior leader at The OpEd Project, amplifying underrepresented expert voices, and managing editor of MLK50: Justice Through Journalism. Payne, a 2021 Nieman Fellow, was previously managing editor of BET.com and an executive producer at Teen Vogue and them., which centers LGBTQ+ voices.

Douglas and Payne spoke to Nieman Fellows in September about their visions for The Emancipator ahead of its anticipated launch. Edited excerpts:

On imagining the historical press for our contemporary moment

Deborah Douglas: In a way, we are reimagining something and not creating something from scratch. The underlying ethos of the original Emancipator is something that we're pulling through this new platform that we're creating.

The energy that we're bringing to the content that we're creating is the same energy that the original Emancipator brought to it, which was a pursuit of democracy, a pursuit of full inclusion into this American project.

We've all experienced in the past few years a sense of some systemic failures. I read a Facebook post the other day [that said], "Are we on our way to being a failed state, or are we a failed state?" That might be catastrophic for some people.

For other people, the experience of living in the United States today brings up these questions about how can we fully be implicated in the promise of democracy and reconfigure systems in a way that works for all of us? In that way, I feel like we are the same as the original Emancipator. They were all about plugging the Black community into what it meant to be a full and complete citizen.

On working in and beyond Boston

Douglas: This will be a national platform that we think will have a global reach because of the quality of the issues that we'll be excavating. We are in Boston, and we're for Boston, but not solely for Boston. Boston is so foundational to the founding of this country. It is foundational to the abolitionist movement. It's important for that.

Amber Payne: This is where the bricks of democracy were first laid, and there's also a very problematic history; some is known, and some is an untold history.

How do we make history? How do we bring history into the present? How do we make history relevant? What kind of throughlines are there that we can draw?

It's also not lost on us that we're working from these two elite institutions [Boston University and The Boston Globe] that also have problematic histories. If we're going to be authentic and curate this audience and build trust and have that transparency, there's also things in The Globe's history and BU's history that would be relevant to us. Those are points of entry.

There's a tendency to think about the struggle. We're also trying to think about the uplift and Black life and arts and culture. We're trying to explore now, how do we also tell those stories in a way that will engage and grow audience?

On co-editing and deconstructing the traditional newsroom power hierarchy

Douglas: This question kept coming up: "That's odd. How is that [co-editing] going to work?" One person thought that — expressed that — this flew in the face of everything that they believe about how newsroom leadership should work.

When I heard that comment, we decided to address it in our mission. We'd like to think that we're going to do things better, that we'll be able to be a model for inclusive journalism.

Our leadership model is a way for us to share our intellect and creativity and talent in a way that shares responsibility for the communities that we serve and ensures power is the antidote to white supremacy, which is preoccupied with hoarding power and hierarchy.

Payne: We're doing everything together. We're in the process of creating this mindmeld, so we can react and operate as a single unit.

What that looks like is just being really open and transparent with each other. We debrief after every call. We talk about, "What came up for you, and what were the high points for you, and what are the action steps for you?"

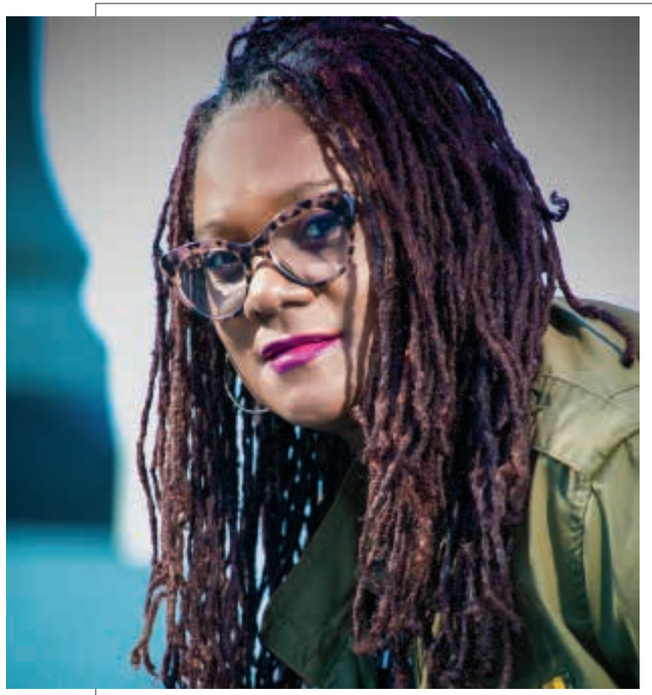
Sometimes, that sparks stories that we tell each other from our backgrounds. There are things that we want to carry forward in our journalistic practice, and there are some practices that we would like to bury.

We've even talked about parts of our childhood belief systems that we no longer adhere to where we we've developed a new set of values or that we're continuing to reconcile. We talked about how that could inform the way we present projects and story ideas.

On cultivating a culture of joy

Douglas: Our mission says that joy underlies our ethos. If that exists on our platform, it needs to exist in our newsroom.

We are are a joyful, can-do, entrepreneurial environment, and we are creating something from scratch together.



In June, The Emancipator announced that it had tapped Deborah Douglas (left) and Amber Payne as its co-editors-in-chief

LEFT: VEN SHERROD; RIGHT: JOHN MAKELY

We're not creating it and then spooning it up to other people. This belongs to all of us. We use language like 'leading' and 'ownership' and being responsible for sharing their expertise with the team, because we all bring some sort of expertise to this job, to this role.

We want to just give space for people to fully be who they are in the newsroom environment. We want to have a positive work experience, and we want to extend that to other people.

There are newsrooms where leadership doesn't necessarily even think about that or believe in that, but I think that by virtue of just expressing that we want an open, transparent, inclusive, joyful environment that is creative and is about solutions, that that is just the beginning of creating something special.

Payne: I think there are just certain things about coming up in the newsroom and getting yelled at, and thinking that that's just how it had to be because I was just a lowly researcher. Yes, it built a thick skin, but it's not a practice that I will ever employ in a newsroom that I'm running.

We both are on the same page with creating this environment. We're in a shared leadership position. It's a collaborative team model.

That's the culture that we're going to try to build upfront, and we're just very self-aware that it starts with us. It starts with the way people see us interacting and working together.

On moving beyond the "Black newspaper" label

Douglas: We're not viewing this as a Black publication. We're looking at this as a mass or universal publication that just happens to use the Black experience as a doorway to a larger conversation.

Just like other communities have frequently been the default for where the conversation starts, because we're grounded in this particular abolitionist history, that abolitionist history is the default, and then we go from there.

Payne: It's two Black women who are the co-editors-in-chief, and we're talking about emancipation, but we want these themes to be larger.

We know that our staff will be diverse and multiracial. We hope that may be one thing that is a clear indicator, and we hope that the content will also make that clear.

There are intersections from Native communities to Asian American communities. It's not that we are going to try to be all things to all communities, but that there are these intersections with the Black experience really operating to and from.

Douglas: I even created a word for what happens specifically to Black women in spaces. I call it "depresencing." I wrote about it in the chapter of "Four Hundred Souls." It's just a given now. Sometimes, I forget to be offended by things because it's just so...

I'm just so used to it. It's like you just get up. You start your day, and you just press forward with the best attitude and willingness to put all the intellect and muscle that you can into it and surround yourself by other people you know in the community and other people in the industry.

And for me, also other women across races. I'm also a senior leader at the OpEd Project, so the woman thing is important to me. I hear from so many people from marginalized backgrounds in this profession. To me, the only way I personally am making it through is just to be in relationships and share stories and share solutions and to build each other up in real time. Not just sometimes, not just when you come together at the annual conference, but in real time just build each other up. ■

A poetry contestant at the Harris Country Juvenile Detention Center

YE-CHIN LEE/HOUSTON CHRONICLE VIA AP PHOTO

Revealing the Failures of the Juvenile Justice System

Tennessee Watson, NF ’20, on why policymakers across the country continue to invest in incarcerating children

The United States incarcerates kids at substantially higher rates than most other countries.

That’s despite decades of research saying supportive programming addresses young peoples’ risky and harmful behavior more effectively than punitive measures. In parts of the U.S., that research has led to reforms, but not everywhere. So even though we know better, why do American policymakers continue to invest in juvenile incarceration?

As a Nieman Abrams Fellow, I spent a year trying to answer that question in Wyoming — a state that for decades has incarcerated kids at a rate well above the national average. It’s hard to deliver services to children with behavioral health needs in small communities dispersed across a vast state, but there also hasn’t been the political will to try. Wyoming relies on its courts without any way of tracking what happens to kids in the justice system.

That lack of data allows lawmakers to ignore the problem and makes it difficult for reporters to cover it. After I had multiple records requests denied by the Wyoming Supreme Court, as well as local law enforcement agencies, I made my way into the story by spending time with the children caught up in the system and their families. There were patterns in the stories they told me: Trauma. Abuse. Anxiety. Depression. Autism. Learning disabilities. Suicide attempts.

Some of my reporting aired on Wyoming Public Radio. The story of one young woman and her family turned into an episode for Reveal, the hour-long radio show produced by the Center for Investigative Reporting. While problems with the juvenile justice system are under-reported, what does get covered often centers around urban communities. I wanted to shine a light on what’s happening to incarcerated kids in rural communities. My reporting also resulted in a comic in the hopes of engaging younger audiences.

All that work has drummed up attention. The state legislature has decided to study juvenile justice reform, and lawmakers are calling for data. There are bills on the table to improve juvenile justice practices that lawmakers will consider during its legislative session early this year. For now, it’s wait and see.

Not long ago, I was asked by a journalism student why policymakers don’t respond to reporting that makes a clear case that what we’re doing isn’t working. Here’s what I think it boils down to: When the children of the elected politicians get in trouble with the law or struggle with school, they can afford lawyers and tutors. They have the time to drive their children to mental health providers and other specialists. The families I interviewed don’t have those resources, and it’s up to journalists to amplify those stories. ■

Launching a Newspaper During a Pandemic

How conversations over coffee helped **Sipho Kings**, NF ’18, create The Continent

A good coffee can help you solve the woes of journalism. That’s what Simon Allison, my co-founder of The Continent newspaper, and I thought. Or hoped.

In the pavement-cracking summer and finger-frosting winter, we’d convene at the coffee shop near our then place of work and discuss journalism. We picked the venue because it had the strongest coffee in Johannesburg. The topic was inevitable for two people obsessed with this industry.

I was a news editor. Simon was an Africa editor. It was clear that our continent needed more quality journalism and a place to publish it. But initially none of our coffees — two shots for me, decaf for him — got us to any solution.

Then came Covid-19. Journalism took a serious hit, particularly in countries like South Africa with heavy lockdowns. We knew all this would mean less journalism about Africa. Print newspapers couldn’t be distributed. Websites have been largely inadequate since our industry threw content there for free. And, across Africa, people were engaging with information on their phones and across chat platforms like WhatsApp.

So, the month Covid-19 hit our country, we created a PDF newspaper around the core idea that people want to read and share quality journalism.

Self-funded at first, we’ve published more than five dozen editions in 18 months and have 15,000 subscribers in over 100 countries. We have donors who have allowed us to build a staff of eight brilliant humans and create a network of 300 reporters, columnists, photographers, cartoonists, and writers. We also have our first advertising deal.

Our first edition in April 2020 was sent to everyone we knew. We soon had a thousand subscribers. We asked that our readers share it with people they think will benefit from good journalism. By involving our audience in distributing The Continent — a survey showed some share it nine times each week — we have built a strong community that knows we value their feedback. We now have a letters page.

Things are looking up.

We didn’t solve all the problems with journalism, but we did create one more place where reporters can do what they love and a newspaper that people can share with friends instead of misinformation. And, we still drink coffee. ■

‘I had to talk to the people who were tasked with freeing me’

Jason Rezaian’s podcast, “544 Days,” traces the 18 months he was held captive in Iran

BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Jason Rezaian, NF ’17, wanted to tell the story of his release from an Iranian prison from multiple perspectives

In early fall, Spotify released a podcast series I’ve been working on since just before the start of the pandemic. “544 Days” is an audio adaptation of my memoir “Prisoner” about my time in Iran’s Evin prison but told from the perspectives of those who were working to secure my freedom.

Published in 2019, “Prisoner” was told from my own point of view. But I always knew there was a much bigger narrative to recount, and as the months passed after I regained my freedom, it became very important to me to report the story of what actually happened for two reasons.

First, since the details of my arrest, imprisonment, and the supposed case against me were distorted by Iran’s domestic propaganda machine, I needed to set the record straight. Even more important, though, the deal that resulted in my freedom became politically contentious here at home almost immediately. More than five years later, it remains so.

To make sense of what went on in the 18 months I was in prison, accused of being a spy, unable to defend myself, and sealed off from the world, I knew I had to talk to the people who were tasked with freeing me.

That began with my family — my wife, my mom, and my brother. In the countless conversations I had with them it became clear that each had very different feelings about the efforts of others working to win my release.

Several months after coming home, when I was feeling a bit more stable in the world, I began speaking with my colleagues at The Washington Post. There was so much I didn’t know about their interventions on my behalf, beginning from the earliest days of my detention.

Finally, in the final year of the Obama administration, I had extraordinary access to the people in government who had negotiated both the nuclear deal with Iran and the deal to release American hostages.

When the book was released, I appeared on the Crooked Media podcast “Pod Save the World” to discuss it with Tommy Vietor and Ben Rhodes, the former deputy national security advisor for strategic communications under Obama involved in the efforts to free me.

When we finished that discussion, I said that I had audio interviews with many of the people who fought for my release including John Kerry, Marty Baron, and Anthony Bourdain. Tommy half-jokingly said, “Let’s make a podcast.”

Now, nearly three years later, we have this show, a joint production with Crooked Media, A24, and Gimlet edited by Alison MacAdam, NF ’14. (MacAdam was also part of the team that won a Peabody for the podcast “Believed,” a multipart series about the abuse Larry Nasser perpetrated as the team doctor for USA Gymnastics.)

That interplay between ordinary people and officials with extraordinary power — who also happen to be ordinary people — is at the heart of “544 Days.” And I think that’s why it’s resonating with so many listeners. ■

ROCK THE VOTE (COVERAGE)

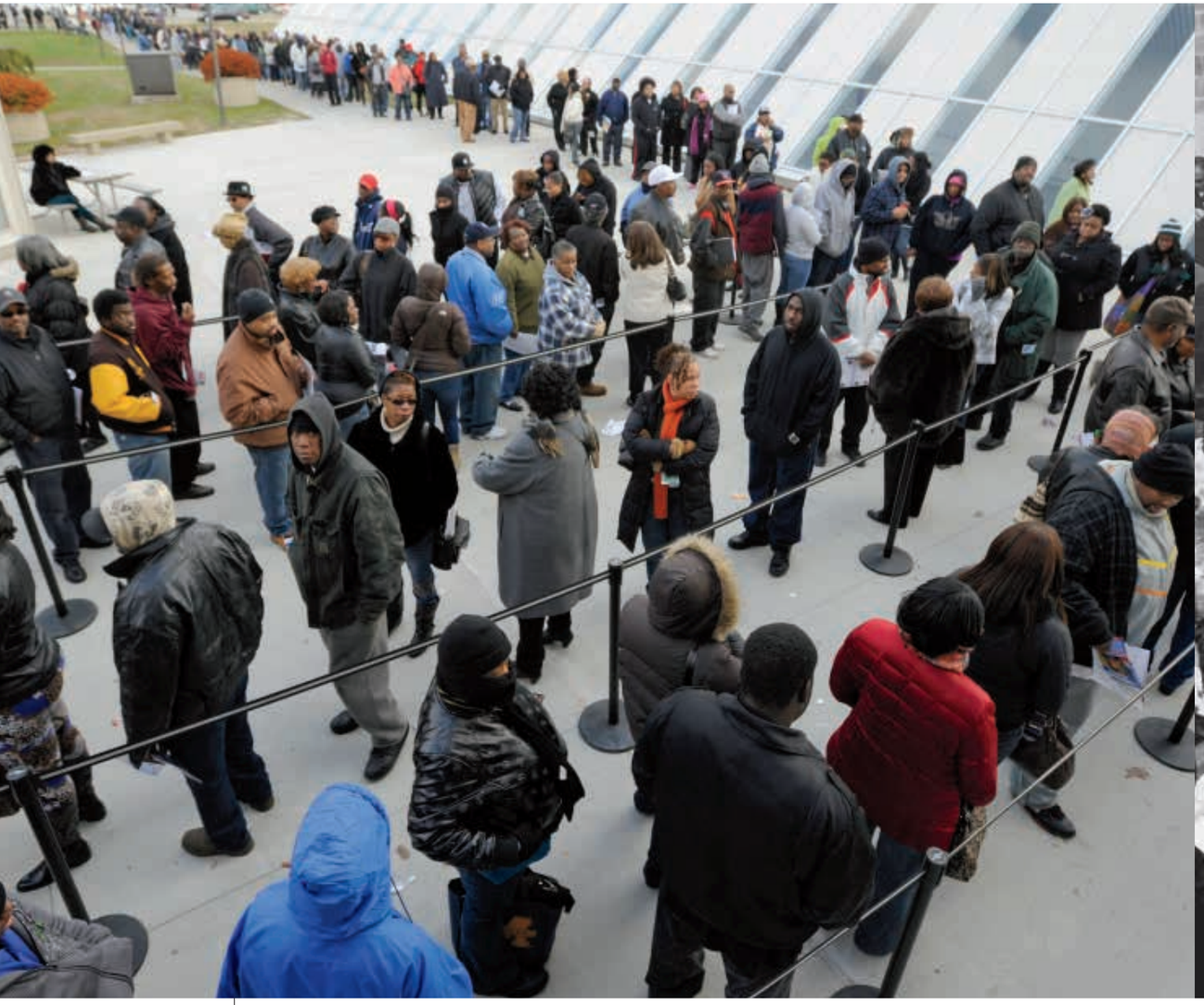
As more states restrict ballot access, news outlets must invest in consistent voting rights reporting that cuts through lies, distortion, and disinformation

BY CELESTE KATZ MARSTON

IN THE FALL OF 2020, voters across the country waited in long lines to cast their ballots in a pivotal election, with press on hand to cover the action.

One Georgia TV reporter talked to an upbeat voter who said, "A lot of people have given up their lives to make it possible for us to vote, so standing here in the sun and checking my phone is not a sacrifice." In Minneapolis, local news quoted a voter who waited two hours as insisting, "No matter how long it was going to take, I was going to get it done." Other outlets ran stories about how people danced to pass the time, only mentioning much further down in the pieces concerns that long lines could hinder people from voting.

When Christina Greer thinks about all the "inspirational" news stories she's read about people for whom the mere act of voting has become an endurance sport, she's not inspired by the coverage. She's exasperated.



PREVIOUS SPREAD: Voters wait in line outside Philadelphia City Hall to cast their ballots in October 2020. Coverage of long wait times to vote has been too positive, according to Fordham professor Christina Greer

PREVIOUS SPREAD: MARK MAKELA/GETTY IMAGES

Research shows that minorities are more likely to encounter long lines to vote and that Black women, in particular, are willing to endure long waits at the polls to exercise their rights. But when reporters approach pieces in the vein of, "Oh my gosh, how beautiful is this? She waited 10 hours to vote," says Greer, an associate professor of political science at Fordham University, "all I [see is] the story of voter suppression. How the hell is someone waiting 10 hours to vote?" Instead of explaining why certain communities had to wait in long lines compared to others, many news outlets frame it as a heartwarming story about an individual who is willing to make extraordinary efforts to exercise their franchise.

"That's not a feel-good story," adds Greer, noting that reporters cover it "like this is the greatest thing since sliced bread." It's a symptom of a larger problem, Greer explains: The media by and large is failing to add key context to stories about voting and hasn't caught on that the Republicans have mounted a coordinated assault on voting rights in the run-up to the 2022 election. "My frustration with the press is that we're reporting on two parties as though they're both just trying to do what's right, and it's actually not the case. We have [to] be honest about what is happening."

In the year since the election, which saw a record number of votes cast, legislators in 19 Republican-led states from Georgia to Texas have enacted nearly three dozen laws designed to "make it harder for Americans to vote," according to the Brennan Center for Justice. False claims of widespread voter fraud made by former President Donald Trump and his followers have triggered the recounting of ballots months after the election was certified, spurring calls for tougher voter I.D. requirements, limits on early and mail-in voting, and expanded voter roll purges. In Washington, D.C., Republicans have repeatedly blocked Democratic-proposed measures to protect access to the ballot.

Journalists covering voting rights have run up against a number of hurdles: Voting laws and practices vary widely from state to state, change periodically, and have technical aspects that take time to learn. At the same time, cash-strapped newsrooms continue to struggle financially, leaving fewer reporters on the voting rights beat. On top of all that, the tactics used to influence lawmakers and disenfranchise voters through social media have evolved.

LEFT: DAVID GURALNICK/AP PHOTO; RIGHT: AP PHOTO

Waiting in long lines to cast a vote has long been a sign of voter suppression, as was the case (on the left) for voters waiting to receive absentee ballots in Detroit in 2012. On the right, Black voters in Birmingham, Alabama, wait to vote in the first election since the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act

“21st century voter suppression is not jelly beans in a jar or bubbles in a bar of soap”

Errin Haines, 19th* News

As Errin Haines of The 19th* puts it, referring to impossible tasks once used to bar Black Americans from casting ballots, “21st century voter suppression is not jelly beans in a jar or bubbles in a bar of soap.”

As the 2022 midterms approach and the gerrymandering of election maps continues, deep, nuanced, and consistent coverage of voting rights is essential to keep the public informed about the threats to their fundamental right to cast a ballot.

GROWING THREATS TO VOTING RIGHTS

About 10 years ago, Ari Berman wrote a piece for Rolling Stone, “The GOP War on Voting.” It forecasted many of the voting restriction efforts of today, which “could prevent millions of students, minorities, immigrants, ex-convicts, and the elderly from casting ballots,” he warned.

Now, much of what Berman explained in that seminal piece is better understood — and openly stated: The Republican Party believes it’s advantageous to limit the number of people who can vote. Trump himself, in the run-up to the 2020 election, disparaged Democratic voting initiatives, saying of them, “They had things, levels of voting that if you’d ever agreed to it, you’d never have a Republican elected in this country again.”

After Trump lost and wasn’t able to pressure election officials — especially in Georgia, where he asked the secretary of state “to find 11,780 votes” — to overturn the results, Republicans in states from Alabama to Wyoming enacted dozens of strict laws that curbed absentee voting, gave more power to partisan poll watchers, eliminated same-day registration, eliminated polling locations, and in one case even gave partisan lawmakers in the state legislature the power to suspend county and municipal level election superintendents. These measures can have a disproportionate effect on minorities and students — many of whom often, but not always, align with Democratic policy positions and candidates.

Few news outlets have had reporters dedicated specifically to covering the voting rights beat, says Berman, now a senior reporter at Mother Jones and author of “Give Us the Ballot: The Modern Struggle for Voting Rights in America.” The threats to those rights have been growing at the state level in a piecemeal way across the country, making it difficult for national media to encompass the entire story. “You’d see [a] story in The Times here or a story in The Post there, but it was all very much buried,” Berman recalls. By the time Trump ran, “2016 was the first presidential election in 50 years without the full protections of the Voting Rights Act, and there wasn’t a single question about voting rights at any of the presidential debates. The issue just wasn’t part of the national consciousness, and [it] just wasn’t thought of as a major story.”

Heading into the 2022 and 2024 elections, and with newly gerrymandered electoral maps starting to appear, journalists will also have to cover redistricting, a highly politicized process that takes place every 10 years.

In North Carolina, a Republican-led state with an electorate that splits roughly 50-50 between Democrats and Republicans in statewide elections, the new map clustered Democrats into three districts, leaving open the possibility that Republicans win 11 of the 14 House seats. In states like Texas and Wisconsin, congressional and state legislative districts are being drawn in a way that favors white voters over Latino, Black, and Asian American voters — populations that are growing faster than their white counterparts.

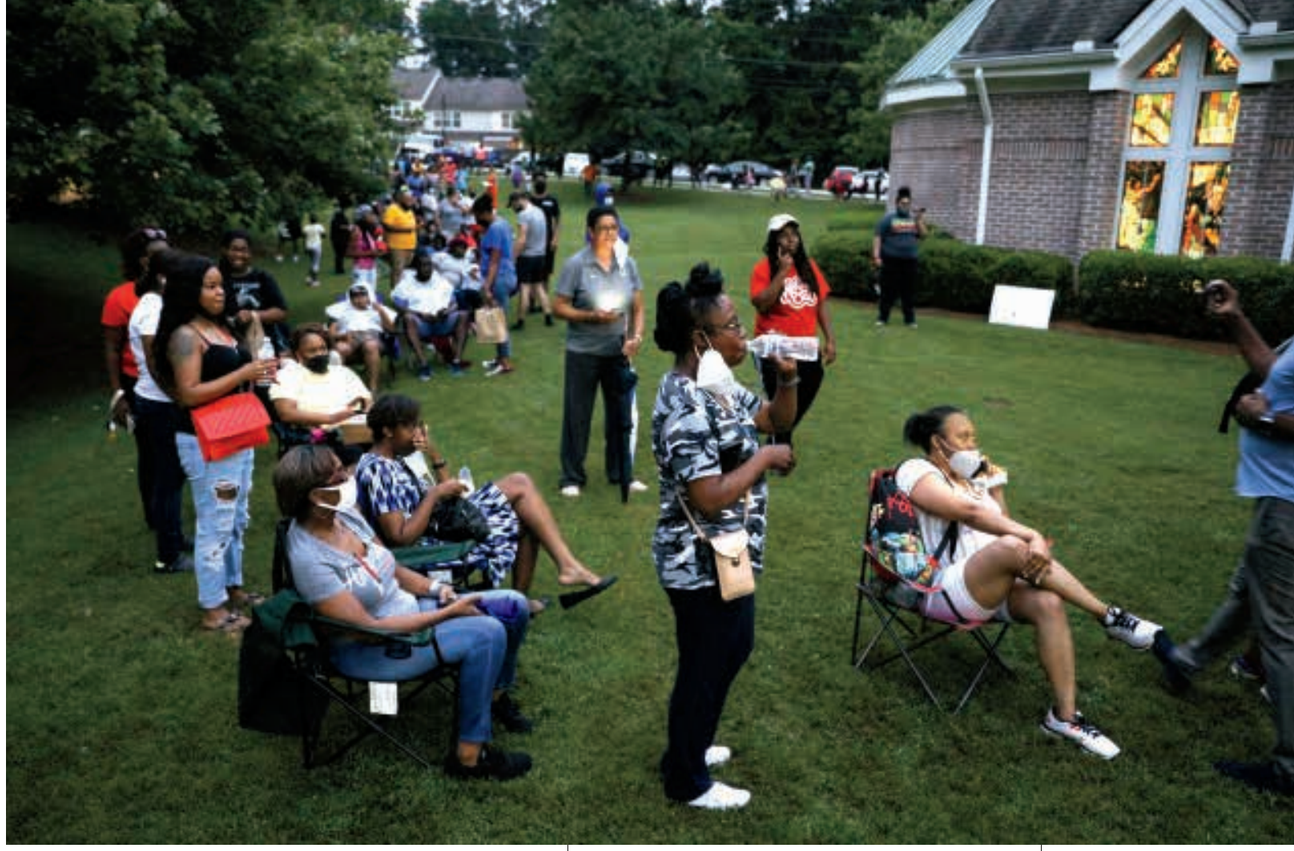
This is the background against which the fight over voting rights is unfolding in Congress. As Republicans continue to block both the John Lewis Voting Rights bill, legislation that would buttress the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and the Freedom to Vote Act, which has provisions designed to make voting easier and reform the redistricting process, reporters naturally focus on the obstruction.

“It’s easy to think about this as politics. It’s easy to think about this as stale policy,” says voting rights and demographics reporter Alexa Ura of The Texas Tribune. “In reality, we’re talking about individual people and their ability to exercise this right that we talk about the need to cherish and honor.”

STARTING COVERAGE ON ELECTION DAY IS TOO LATE

Reporters covering voting rights and election administration full time or most of the time remain relatively few compared to those who cover general politics or government. “Voting is a thing that we care about seasonally. It is not the city council that meets every week [or] the school you send your kid to every day,” says Jessica Huseman, editorial director of Votebeat, a non-profit that exclusively covers voting and elections. “This is something that most people engage with every two to every four years.”

Although voting rights may be a topic of national conversation, election administration is an intricate system, different in every state, that takes time and sourcing to master. State and county authorities set the rules for how their elections are run, buy the machines and software used to conduct them, train the poll workers, and count the votes. Local news organizations are uniquely situated to understand the nuance, but it’s an expertise that has been lost over time as local newsrooms have closed.



DUSTIN CHAMBERS/REUTERS

Voters line up at Christian City, an assisted living home in Union City, Georgia, in June 2020 to cast their ballots in the Democratic and Republican primaries. The vote had been delayed because of coronavirus restrictions

When news staffing is short, coverage of this process — the “boring” but important stuff — can be the first to go. A 2019 study by the University of Texas at Austin found that, thanks to metrics pressures on media, news outlets spent more of their time covering local government activities “that will immediately or have already begun affecting citizens” versus offering more forward-looking work. It’s a lesson that has a direct impact on covering the mechanics of how people vote — if you’re starting that work on Election Day, you’re much too late.

“Because newsrooms are so strapped,” Huseman says, “it’s difficult to be like, ‘Hey, the machines that will be used in a year and a half are being purchased now’ — so it will be too late to cover how bad these machines are right before we vote on them. You need to cover that now,” when other pressing issues demand attention. Newsrooms “wouldn’t interact with the criminal justice system by only covering it when someone is up on a murder trial ... but there’s no equivalent of that for voting,” Huseman points out. She urges newsrooms to view local government and civil rights coverage as related beats because the function of the first directly impacts the second.

When people think of news stories about voting rights, it’s perhaps easier to envision a segment showing a march with signs and chanting than one showing a hearing on poll site locations or the award of a contract for new ballot scanners. Think about it: How many Americans could name a single major voting machine manufacturer — and there are only a few dominating the U.S. market — before Trump allies tried to accuse Dominion Voting Systems of conspiring to rig the 2020 election? How many newsrooms regularly track not only new voter registrations, but purges of existing voter rolls or poll site closures from cycle to cycle?

Familiarity with local voting regulations and policies can give reporters a big leg up. Jen Fifield of the Arizona Republic was dubbed “Blue Pen Jen” during the Cyber Ninjas audit after she noticed (and tweeted) that workers at the Arizona Veterans Memorial Coliseum in Phoenix had blue pens, which potentially could have been used to alter ballots, instead of pens with red ink that would not be read by scanners. It was a small detail that got a lot of national pickup because it told a bigger story about the qualifications (or lack thereof) of Cyber Ninjas to conduct such a review of the vote, she says — and Fifield noticed it because she’d educated herself on the local rules about ballots and ink. “It gave me hope that local reporters can bring attention to issues like voting rights in ways that national reporters can’t, because we’re on the ground level,” Fifield says. (The Cyber Ninjas review concluded that Joe Biden had, in fact, won Arizona.)

Voting rights reporters like Fifield stress that understanding the election system before the voting begins

“Local reporters can bring attention to issues like voting rights in ways national reporters can’t, because we’re on the ground level”

Jen Fifield,

Arizona Republic

is crucial. Get to know the people who actually run elections, not just those who run in them. For a start, election administrators have their own professional societies. Tour the places where registrations are processed and votes are tabulated. Examine ballot design. Put in requests for locality-specific datasets and download those that are publicly available. Reach out to the academics who make studying voting systems and rights their life’s work, beat reporters add.

COVERING VOTING ACROSS BEATS

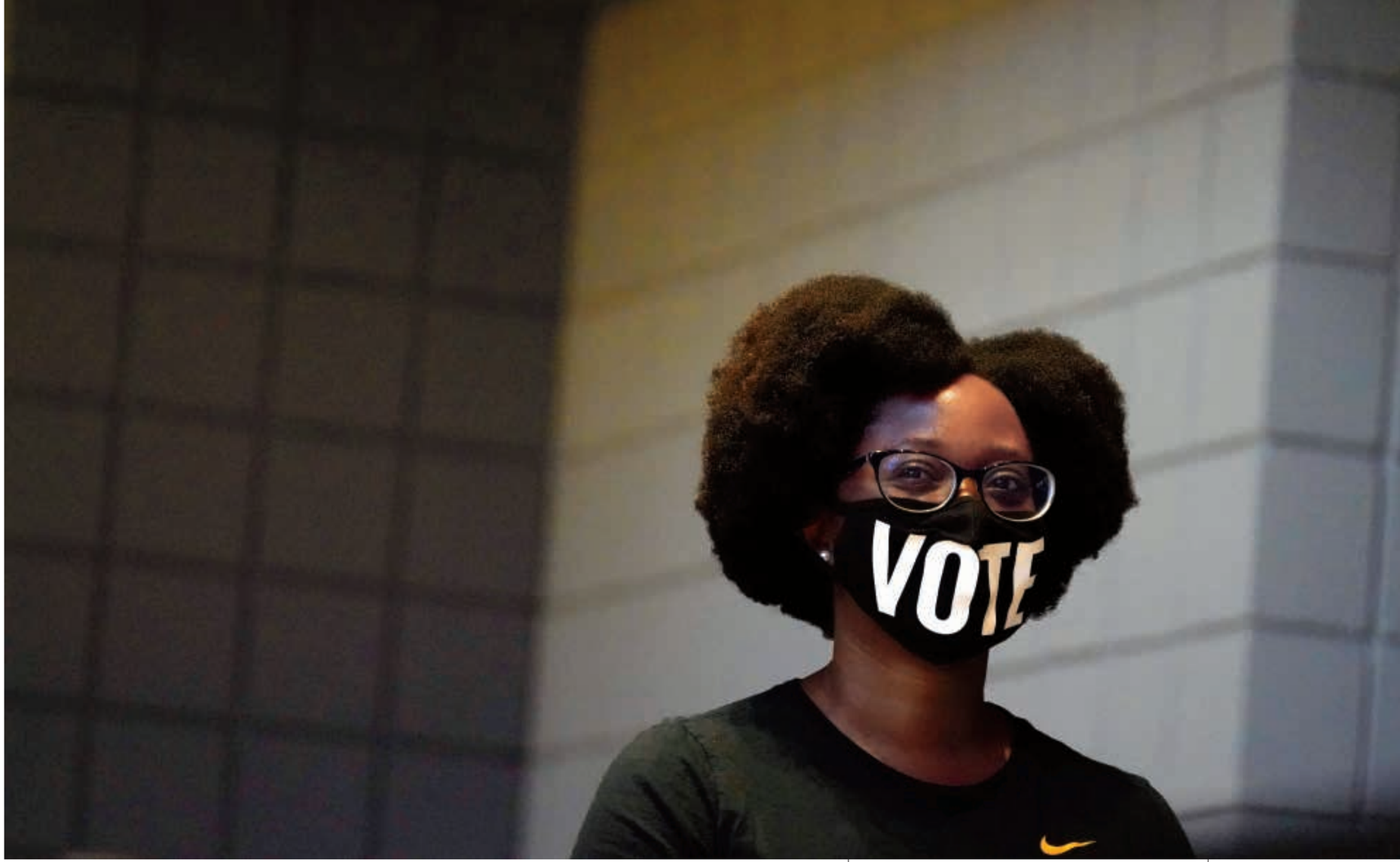
Voting rights isn’t a single topic but can be covered across an array of beats. It became a huge business story — and even a sports story — in Georgia last year, when Major League Baseball pulled its All-Star Game out of Atlanta in a public statement against restrictive legislation. Education reporters can look at how voting rights and civics are taught in schools; government reporters can dedicate part of a budget story to spending on election administration.

It’s also a criminal justice issue: Outlets like The Marshall Project, which focuses on topics such as incarceration, policing, and mental health, have reported extensively on restoration of felon voting rights, including a joint investigation with the Louisville Courier-Journal and USA Today Network that found only a fraction of formerly incarcerated people in four key states made it back onto the voter rolls in time for the 2020 election. The story pointed out that “None of the states in our analysis required corrections departments or boards of elections to notify newly eligible voters of their rights.”

Technological literacy has also become a bigger part of coverage of voting rights. And, reporting on how campaigns and dark money actors use technology to persuade voters — and in some cases, try to stop them from exercising their franchise — is an increasingly important part of this beat. Scrutiny of data caches can reveal what’s going on behind the scenes in a way that wasn’t previously possible. For example, even as campaigns scramble to develop new methods to motivate voters, they also work to deter others from showing up. Investigative reporting by Channel 4 News, a U.K.-based broadcaster, showed the Trump campaign in 2016 put 3.5 million Black Americans in a “deterrence” category, meaning it actively used social media and negative TV ads to discourage minorities in states like Georgia and Florida from voting for Democrat Hillary Clinton.

Civil rights organizations blasted the race-based profiling as “modern-day voter suppression.” The ads “included videos featuring Hillary Clinton referring to Black youths as ‘super predators’ which aired on television 402 times in October 2016 and received millions of views on Facebook,” Channel 4 reported. Its analysis of a database used by Trump’s digital campaign operation found that Black voters were targeted to receive the deterrent ads in much higher proportion than their share of the population in states including Georgia, North Carolina, and Wisconsin.

Journalists on the tech beat and even those who cover defense have been pulled into reporting on this topic, particularly the cybersecurity angle as it pertains to instances of foreign meddling in U.S. campaigns and elections. (Elections were designated part of the country’s critical infrastructure in 2017.) The right to vote arguably loses meaning if Americans cannot confidently vote not only freely and fairly, but securely, and there’s evidence that not all those goals have been fully achieved. A 2020 Politico piece examined multiple issues states still had to address to make elections more secure, including replacing paperless voting machines, hitting the brakes on the drive for voting by internet, and changing the way election results are audited for accuracy.



Ashley Nealy waits in line to vote early at the State Farm Arena in Atlanta in October 2020. Errin Haines of The 19th* notes that Black women vote at higher rates because they understand the stakes

BRYNN ANDERSON/AP PHOTO

PRO-VOTER BIAS

When it comes to voting-related legislation, for newsrooms short on time and staff, it can be tempting to slip into the horserace, hot take-heavy pack coverage. “The risk is that it’s going to be covered [as an] inside-baseball process story [as] opposed to what the bill would actually do,” Mother Jones’ Berman says.

Reporters who cover voting say “bothsidesism” must be eschewed — particularly when covering claims of non-existent systemic voter fraud, which are often used to advance restrictive measures like voter I.D. requirements.

After Trump and his supporters refused to accept Biden’s victory in November 2020 and instead doubled down on false claims of election rigging, Grace Panetta, a senior politics reporter who covers voting rights for Insider, took apart leading claims of “widespread” fraud — largely those advanced by conservative groups like the Heritage Foundation — by laying out for readers that statistically, Americans are more likely to be hit by lightning than commit fraud through mail or in-person ballots. But when more liberally inclined sources attacked Kentucky as a hotbed of voter suppression for cutting the number of in-person polling places in the same election, Panetta fact-checked those claims, too,

noting among other things that mega-voting centers (the Kentucky Exposition Center was big enough to accommodate 18 separate lines), early voting, and absentee voting without an official excuse required made for a reasonably smooth election in the state.

Being "non-biased and nonpartisan [is] extremely important to me, but I've really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with [saying], 'This is a lie. This is misinformation. This is not true,'" Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is "outdated when it's not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders [of] one political [party] claiming that elections are rigged or spreading this kind of misinformation for political gain."

Just recently, Panetta was among the many critics of The Wall Street Journal's decision to publish a letter to the editor from Trump himself, in which the former president recycled many of the debunked claims of a rigged election in Pennsylvania. She tweeted, as part of a thread, "I don't understand how you can live through the past year and think, 'ah yes, letting people make up their own minds about 'bananas' claims on the integrity of US elections has worked out great! let's keep laundering them to a mass audience with no fact-checking!'"

The language reporters use to cover voting matters, too. What one group refers to as "voter suppression" is framed by opponents as measures to shore up "election integrity" — even in the absence of evidence of a fraud problem. The dichotomy of language reflects the split in American attitudes toward who's to blame for U.S. democracy being under threat. The best course is to stick to the plain facts and not engage in what Berman of Mother Jones calls "he said-she said coverage" of voting.

Covering voting rights is a beat "where you can do a lot of showing-not-telling just through your work, in terms of just illustrating, 'What is motivating this? Who is being targeted by it? Why is it even happening the first place?'" Berman says.

Going a step further, "I don't think it's necessarily bad for the media to have a pro-voter bias. That's different than having a pro-Democratic bias [or] an anti-Republican bias," he argues. "I have a pro-voter bias; I'm for policies that expand access to the ballot. I don't think that should make me a progressive or partisan sympathizer."

"I don't think it's necessarily bad for the media to have a pro-voter bias. That's different than having a pro-Democratic bias [or] an anti-Republican bias"

Ari Berman, Mother Jones

VOTING RIGHTS AS SERVICE JOURNALISM

Covering threats to the right to vote — or, at least, doing it well — is inextricably linked to what even the most dedicated beat reporters admit can be pretty dry stuff. It's a lot easier to focus on something relatable — even if it isn't really the biggest issue. The classic example is the reams of coverage of Georgia's ban on giving water (or food) to someone waiting in line to vote, which is easier to understand and visualize than the technical aspects of I.D. matching or who has the power to certify election results.

"One of the best pieces of advice I was given for covering voting rights and elections was to think of it as a customer service story," says Georgia Public Broadcasting's Stephen Fowler, who's reported extensively about his home state's election-related tumult and hosted the GPB podcast "Battleground: Ballot Box." "Taking these wonky changes and proposals and laws and obstacles and centering it on the voter and how they're impacted [goes] a long way towards connecting abstract theory [to] how it actually impacts people."

Case in point: Fowler's work on a data-driven 2020 investigation of how cuts to the number of poll sites in predominantly Black neighborhoods added up to longer, frustrating waits to vote. During the June 2020 primary, the average wait time after 7 p.m. was 51 minutes at Georgia polling places that were 90% or more nonwhite; at sites that were 90% white, it was six minutes. Georgia voters had roughly 330 fewer polling places in June 2020 than they had in November 2012. Between 2012 and 2020, the number of voters served at the average poll site jumped 47%, the piece reported.

"I think universally, people can empathize with [waiting] in line for hours to cast a ballot," Fowler says. "Somebody saying they waited in line four hours because their polling place is overcrowded because the population doubled and the number of polls stayed the same — that's something that somebody can see as a customer service story."

If outlets fear that covering the nitty gritty aspects of election law and administration is a recipe for flat traffic numbers, Fowler's experience proves otherwise. He says a March explainer he did on Georgia's new 98-page "Election Integrity Act" got more than 500,000 views.

At Insider, besides voting rights, Panetta covers general politics and breaking news, as well as aggregates stories, "because I do have traffic goals to meet. That is how my performance is measured," she says. But, she credits savvy newsroom leaders with still giving her the space to dedicate time to voting rights. "I think that is a really important lesson for editors: [Let] your reporters write about something that might not be taking off or blowing up at first, because it could be the biggest issue in the news cycle in a few months." Building that fluency with the topic also lays the groundwork for deeper dives, such as Panetta's examination of the distinct challenges to voting rights and access in Native American communities.

Haines, a former AP reporter, widely covers civil rights, women's issues, politics, and social justice for The 19th*. She voted in the 2020 election in Philadelphia in person because the mail ballot she'd requested never showed up. "In the city where the Constitution was written and signed, where we celebrate the founding principles of democracy," she had to wait four hours to vote, she says.

As a journalist — no less for an outlet named for the amendment granting women, although not all women, the vote — Haines says she's cognizant of having had the privilege of being able to spend half a day waiting to cast her ballot. "The people who I saw walking out of line, who were mostly Black and brown, who could not afford to wait, [that's] not going to be lost on me," Haines said.

Part of the answer to better voting rights coverage is diversifying the pool of people who cover civic issues. Black women, Haines notes, vote at high rates because they understand the stakes. "You put a Black woman on a story about voting, and they are going to get it," she adds.

Fordham University's Greer, who is writing a book on Barbara Jordan, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Stacey Abrams, argues that to cover voting best, journalists need to understand and synthesize the intricacies of voting laws, the history of race and racism in America, party politics, and shifting migration patterns. "Many journalists don't understand race or class," she adds, noting that there's a danger of "group-thought" among reporters, particularly if influential outlets assemble their staffs in timeworn ways and are "not really thinking about the value of journalists who may have come from a different route or different community." To help combat this, she says, "We have to figure out a way [to] support local journalism so that people who are closest to the ground, who understand the nuance of a community, are actually reporting on it."

For Ura of The Texas Tribune, having grown up in a "lower socioeconomic" border community reinforces "my view on the more natural barriers that can exist that keep people from voting," Ura says. Her reporting on Texas Senate Bill 7's voting restrictions, for example, often noted that curtailing poll site hours could have an adverse impact on the ability of shift workers to cast a vote. Speaking Spanish also gives her an advantage that she uses to communicate with voters and assess the quality of the Spanish-language materials that the state and county are required to provide. "Acknowledging that not everyone votes in English is a really crucial part of the beat" that deserves more attention than it often gets, she says.

VOTING RIGHTS AND DATA

Jonathan Lai of The Philadelphia Inquirer juggles multiple roles: He's both the data and democracy reporter and the editor of data-driven storytelling. In his data and democracy role, Lai — whose work has been widely cited in coverage of Pennsylvania's voting turmoil — has examined everything from lawsuits to the "forensic investigation" of the 2020 election results to the disparate impacts on various communities of changes to voting. "I'm not interested in party affiliation and partisanship, and I don't care who wins. I care who votes," he says.

Data often illuminate how rule changes can have an outsized impact on certain voters. But he cautions that commonly scrutinized information, such as turnout, doesn't tell the whole story about an election — or threats to voting rights. "It is a binary data point: Did you vote or did you not vote? It does not capture the cost of that vote," he says.

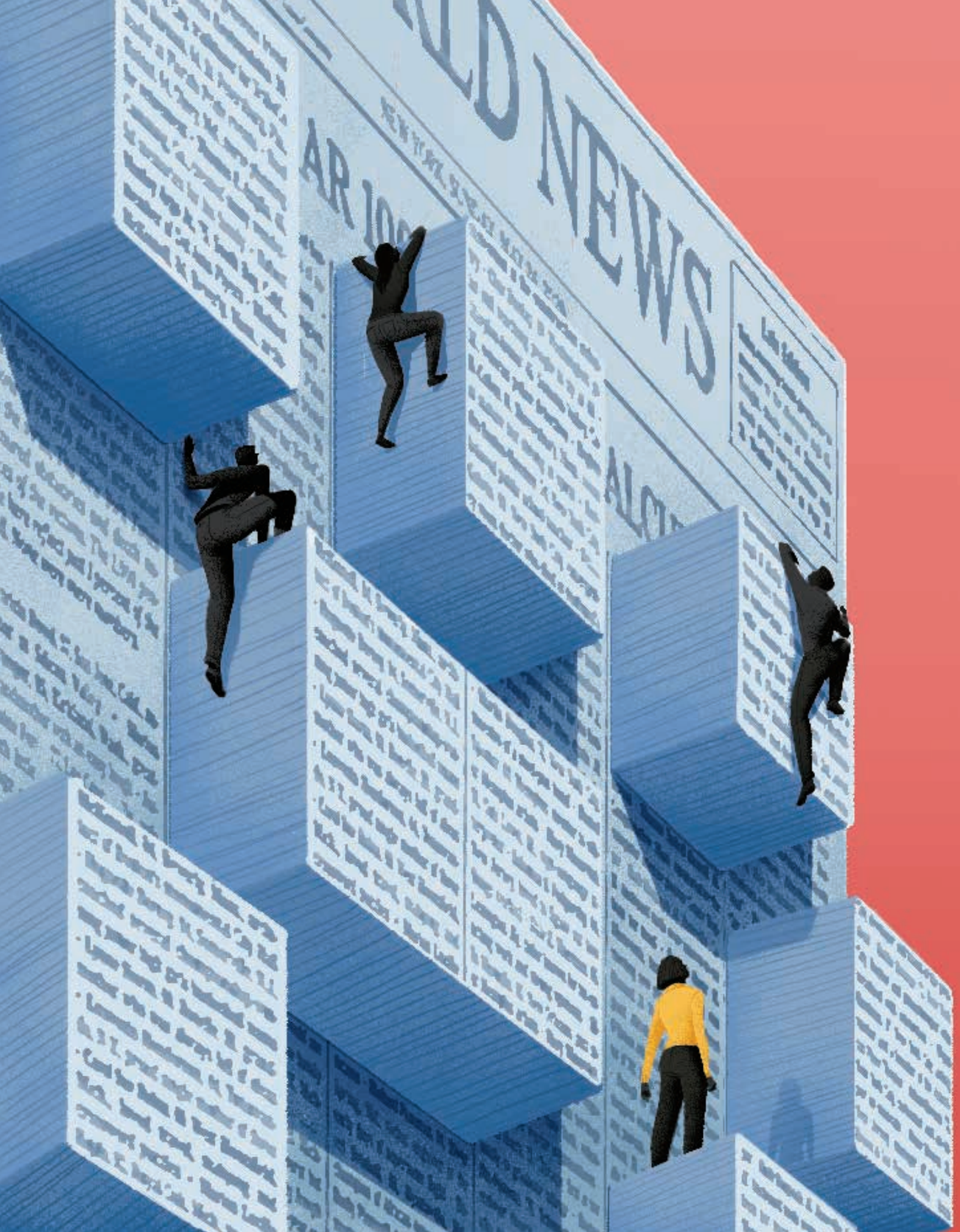
Experiences vary widely, he says, noting some people only have to wait in line for a few minutes to cast their ballots while others have to wait hours. "If somebody voted, it doesn't tell us that they stood outside in the rain for an hour," he explains. "If somebody doesn't vote, it doesn't tell us that they drove over, saw the rain and the long line, and went home. So drawing conclusions from voter turnout [is] very dangerous, and we have to be very careful about how we do it."

In a joint 2020 investigation with ProPublica, Lai looked at the effect of Pennsylvania's new vote-by-mail law and found it did little to improve turnout among Philadelphia's poor, who may lack a stable mailing address, English-language proficiency, and the internet connectivity needed to request ballots and get election information. Rather than lean on generalizations, the investigation relied on data analysis and highlighted how individual low-income Philadelphians overcame barriers to voting by seeking help from community organizations and memorizing favored candidates' names in English. Notably, Lai and his colleagues didn't just point out the law's shortfalls but included potential ways to close those gaps, including early voting and automatic and same-day registration.

The Inquirer/ProPublica piece underscored how by using data, reporters and teams covering threats to voting rights can use anecdotes as an enhancement to their coverage, not as its sole basis.

Those who cover voting — both the right to do it and how it's actually done — say they're glad the issue is getting far more scrutiny than in years past. For Lai and others dedicated to documenting it, however, the new attention also raises questions about what's really at the core of that fascination.

"My only concern is that there are a lot of people who are interested because they think that things are much more broken than they actually are," Lai cautions. "If you are only interested because you think that something went wrong on Nov. 3, 2020, [or think] we need to quote unquote, 'fix' something [because] you think that those 'fixes' will change who wins in the future, that is a very dangerous position for us to be in." ■



IT'S TIME TO CREATE AN ALTERNATIVE PATH INTO JOURNALISM

We need to expand the pool of people who can enter the industry, and an idea from K-12 education might help

BY JOSHUA BENTON

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ANDREA DESANTIS

I

Some journalism debates will never die. "Are bloggers journalists?" "Is objectivity achievable, just a goal to strive toward, or dumb?" And the classic: "Journalism school: worthwhile investment or giant scam?"

It's that last one that flared up a few months back with the publication of a story in The Wall Street Journal that noted, correctly, that journalism school costs a lot of money, but journalists don't make a lot of money:

> Many students leave even the most prestigious private graduate programs, such as those at Northwestern University, Columbia University, and the University of Southern California, with earnings too low to let them make progress paying off their loans, according to a Wall Street Journal analysis of Education Department figures released this year.
>
> At Northwestern, students who recently earned a master's degree in journalism and took out federal loans borrowed a median $54,900 — more than three times as much as their undergraduate counterparts did. That is the biggest gap of any university with available data. Worse still, the master's degree holders make less money. Early-career earnings for those with master's degrees in journalism from Northwestern are about $1,500 lower than for its undergraduate students, data show.

That clinches it, people: Your latest wild get-rich-quick scheme — getting a graduate degree in journalism from a private university — probably isn't going to work. The Journal story adds:

> Tuition for the one-year master's degree in journalism from Northwestern's Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications increased by 17% in the past 10 years, adjusted for inflation, to $67,900 this school year, university records show. At the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, tuition for the 9½-month program rose by 26%, adjusted for inflation, to $70,300.
>
> Including fees and living expenses, total costs for each program top $100,000...
>
> Graduate students at private journalism schools borrow heavily to attend the programs. At USC's Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, master's graduates from 2015 and 2016, the latest cohorts for which both loan balances and earnings are available, had median debt of $67,700. The median loan burden was $56,700 at Columbia.

It would be hard to describe these numbers as surprising, and many of the reactions to them were also standard fare. There were The Successful Journalists Who Didn't Go To Journalism School And Think It's Insane. The Successful Journalists Who Went to J-School But Back When Prices Were Reasonable. The J-School Grads Who Hate The Price But Felt They Had To Go Nonetheless. The Young Journalists Who Still Worry It's Essential For A Good Career. And, of course, there were ... The Mizzou Grads, one of whom shared on Twitter that if you get a teaching assistant position, your tuition is waived. (The university itself tweeted "World-class education, far less student debt, higher salaries. What are you waiting for?" with a link to the story.)

There are good points to be made on all sides here. Journalism has a diversity problem. Actually, it has diversity problems, plural: racial diversity, class diversity, gender diversity, geographic diversity, and more.

And there are really only two major ways such problems can be addressed. You can change who gets to enter the profession, or you can change what happens to them once they're already in it.

That second one is mostly the turf of bosses — editors, recruiters, executives, and the other people who determine how newsrooms work. But who gets to become a journalist? That's a place where journalism education has a giant role to play — to serve either as an enabler or a barrier for those trying to enter the field.

And costing more than $100,000 is a pretty good sign that you're a barrier.

Can that change? I think there might be a way to take an idea from K-12 education to help journalism open its doors a little bit wider.

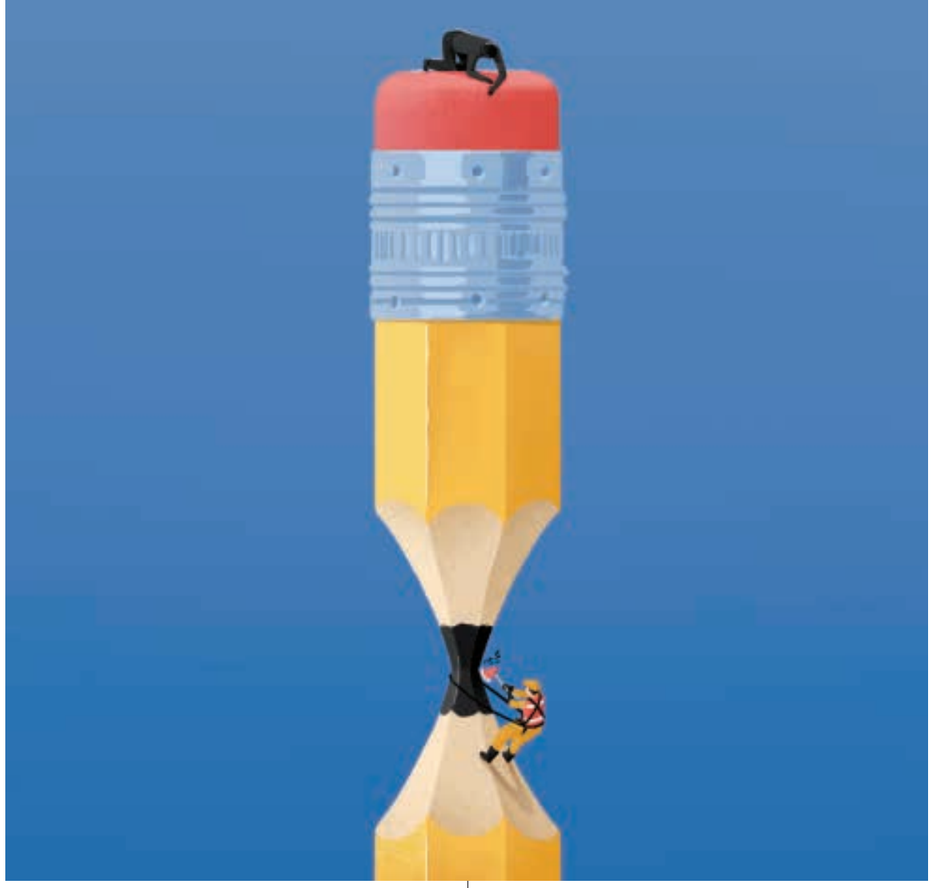
II

As it stands now, there are four major paths to getting your first full-time job in the American news business. (I will acknowledge upfront that these are simplifications, that people's real-world careers often take elements from several of them, and that some lucky unicorns will make it in the business without following any of them.)

Two of them are paths people typically choose before they can legally buy a beer:

■ **The Journalism Undergrad Path.** These are people who knew pretty early on that they were interested in journalism as a career, so they made it their major. They took a dozen or so journalism courses, taught by trained professionals, and eventually walked across a stage wearing a funny hat and clutching a diploma that said JOURNALISM.

■ **The School Newspaper Path**. These are people who have a bachelor's degree, but in something other than journalism. Maybe it's in something that's at least a little journalism-adjacent, like history, economics, or English, or maybe it's something totally random. But they did some journalism work as undergrads, usually at the student paper, often reaching a top job there. They got a little professional work experience at a summer internship or two, and they're ready to apply for staff jobs at graduation.



It's important to note that these two paths are often — not always, but often — taken by people from different class backgrounds. The nation's elite private colleges generally don't offer undergraduates a journalism major. Only two of the top 25 national universities in U.S. News' rankings offer a journalism major. In the Ivy League, only Columbia has a J-school, and it's for grad students only.

Meanwhile, you can get a journalism degree from just about any flagship state university, as well as a lot of other public colleges. While there are lots of rich kids who go to a state school — and at least some (not enough) poor and working-class kids who get a full-ride to an elite private school — there's still often a significant class difference between the School Newspaper and Journalism Undergrad types.

Then there are two other paths available to people who didn't focus their lives on journalism when they were of college age — either because they weren't interested at the time or circumstances made it impossible:

■ **The Freelance-Til-You-Make-It Path.** While it can be hard to get a staff job at a news organization, just about anyone with talent and drive can figure out a way to sell somebody on a freelance pitch once. Do a good job on that one and maybe you get to pitch another one. Then another one, to a different outlet. Repeat often enough — even while you're working a day job in another field — and you've built up some relationships with editors and built a portfolio of excellent clips that can get you a full-time job.

JOURNALISM HAS A DIVERSITY PROBLEM. ACTUALLY, IT HAS DIVERSITY PROBLEMS, PLURAL: RACIAL DIVERSITY, CLASS DIVERSITY, GENDER DIVERSITY, GEOGRAPHIC DIVERSITY, AND MORE

■ **The J-School Master's Degree Path**. You start a career outside journalism, but at some point, for some reason, you decide you want a change. You decide it's important enough to you to step out of your normal life and spend a year or two focused on learning the craft of journalism. You enroll in a master's degree program at a journalism school, pay what is usually a lot of money, and then enter the job market after graduation.

For the Journalism Undergrad and J-School Master's Degree paths, the primary credential you bring to an employer is your education. For the School Newspaper

Path and Freelance-Til-You-Make-It paths, your primary credential is your work.

How many journalists take each path? It's hard to say with any precision. Surveys have shown that a little less than 40% of working journalists were journalism majors as undergrads; add in mass communications and other related fields and you get to around 50%. About 20% of journalists have a master's degree — but that includes those with a master's in some other field.

Notice that a couple potential routes are missing. (Again, some people make it into journalism these ways, of course, but not as many.)

■ **The No-College Path.** "Newspapering," back when that was the term, used to be a job that required no educational credential at all. In the early 20th century, some newspaper editors decried the over-educated products of these newfangled journalism schools, saying they liked their reporters less high-falutin'. But that path is all but shut today. A 2016 survey of working American journalists found that only 1.5% had never gone to college. Another 4.8% had gone to college but left before getting a degree. That's it — nearly 94% of journalists have at least a bachelor's degree. And 21% have a master's or doctorate.

Education is great! But remember, only about one-third of American adults have a bachelor's degree. Those who don't are much more likely to be poor and non-white than those who do. If a bachelor's degree is a functional requirement to cover a city council meeting, you're destined to have a less representative pool of candidates to draw from.

■ **The Low-Resources Path.** These are people who decided as adults they were interested in journalism — but who don't have the kind of money to drop everything for a master's. Spending a year or two without a paycheck, then graduating with the burden of student debt? It's just not realistic. These are also often people who don't have the free time or energy to build a career out of freelancing. They have kids, or responsibilities to care for family members. They juggle two jobs to make rent and pay for childcare. Their options for getting into journalism will always be narrower than what a childless 26-year-old Cornell grad with some family money to fall back on can try.

By making some of these routes so difficult to take, journalism loses out on a lot of talented people — people who would be great reporters or editors. More importantly, those talented people look more like America than the news business does — meaning they wouldn't just tell more stories, they'd tell different stories.

This is a problem that's been raised by journalists of color or from less privileged backgrounds whenever the "Is J-school worth it?" debate comes around. Rachelle Hampton nailed it in Slate in 2018 when she wrote: "Until Journalism Is a Real Meritocracy, J-School Is a Necessary Evil for Minorities." As she noted:

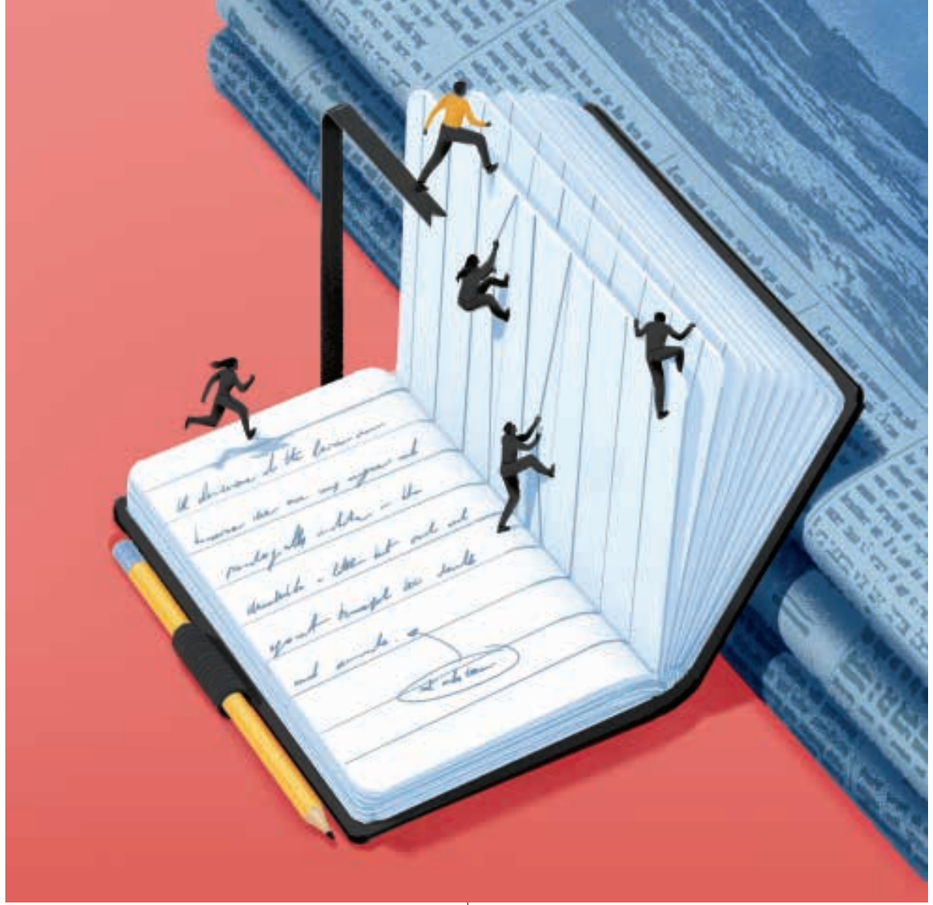
> Critics of J-school also focus on the fact that the tools of the trade are mostly learned on the job, rendering journalism schools pointless. "Let internships be your J-school," advises New York Times culture writer Sopan Deb. [Hamilton] Nolan reminds us that while one of the main selling points of journalism schools is that it will help graduates get a decent job in the industry, that claim is demonstrably false because "plenty of successful working journalists never went to J-school." Which is true! But a lot of successful working journalists did go to J-school — and not because they thought it meant they would be able to skip getting internships. They went so they could get internships, because that's what the state of journalism requires for people without the social connections to break into the industry — especially those who are low-income or of color.
>
> As a black woman I didn't have a choice not to go to J-school — and that's a sentiment shared among many of my classmates. Journalism is an industry rife with nepotism, where career trajectories are determined more often by the people that you know rather than the quality of your work. When journalists of color make up less than 17 percent of American newsrooms and 75 percent of white people have no nonwhite friends, making connections in the industry after graduation is a luxury afforded to very few people of color. Breaking into these elite spaces is a necessity, and journalism school not only gives you access to professors with connections but also the future journalists who could put you in contact with your next hiring manager. As important as journalism internships are — and they are important — screeds advocating against J-school rarely acknowledge that a fair amount of journalists who look like me need the institutional legitimacy of places like Northwestern to even get an internship. And for people who can't afford to work a low-paid or unpaid internship after college, getting your foot in the door as early as possible is paramount.

III

In a previous life, I wrote about K-12 education for The Dallas Morning News. One of the defining characteristics of the Dallas area is growth: There's always another acre of corn fields ready to be turned into subdivisions and strip malls. (The school district in suburban Frisco had about 7,200 students when I moved to Dallas 21 years ago. Today it has more than 65,000.) Lots of new students meant lots of new teachers, and Texas had to figure out where to find them.

There's a traditional path for people who want to become teachers: You go to college and major in education. Do that, pass a teacher certification exam, and you're officially a teacher. (I fully acknowledge this process varies from state to state and I'm no doubt leaving out some other step required where you live. Generalities, y'all.)

But what if you didn't realize you wanted to become a teacher until later? Maybe law school didn't pan out,



but you always loved history. Or you became an engineer but realized you really just wanted to teach kids physics. Or maybe you got a job at a preschool and decided you want to move up to teaching kindergarten. You have a bachelor's degree, but you've never taken an education course in your life. What then?

There's a path for you. It's called alternative certification, and it's meant for career switchers who have the content knowledge but not the teaching experience. For people who hadn't figured out their career path at age 19, in other words.

Alt-cert programs have been very successful in two important ways. They've brought a lot of talented teachers into education. And they've been a big part of increasing the field's diversity.

As of 2019, American K-12 teachers who'd taken the traditional route to certification were 82.2% white, 7.9% Hispanic, and 5.3% Black. Those who'd taken the alternative route were significantly more diverse: 66.5% white, 15.5% Hispanic, and 12.9% Black.

In other words, alt-cert teachers are more than twice as likely to be Black or Hispanic than traditionally certified ones.

At one point in Texas, 9% of all K-12 teachers were non-white, but 41% of those who came through alt-cert programs were.

ALT-CERT PROGRAMS HAVE BEEN VERY SUCCESSFUL IN BRINGING TALENTED TEACHERS INTO EDUCATION AND DIVERSIFYING THE FIELD

Alt-cert teachers were also significantly more likely (22% vs. 13.8%) to be teaching math or science — in-demand jobs that schools usually have the most problems filling. They were also more likely (32% vs. 22%) to be men, who are less likely to plan a teaching career straight out of high school.

To be clear, there are plenty of legitimate complaints about alternative certification programs. First of all, there are a ton of them, they're not amazingly well regulated, and some are better than others. (Just like education schools, I might add.) Some of them are for-profit, some are nonprofit, and some are part of well established education schools. Some require little-to-no training as a teacher before dumping someone into a classroom. Schools need to keep an eye on them to make sure they're meeting minimum standards and producing sound rookie teachers.

But there's no doubt that alt-cert programs have, on net, been a big win for schools. "Go back to school and get another degree" just isn't going to be a reasonable choice

for most adult career switchers. And research has generally shown there's not much difference between how much a student learns from an alt-cert teacher versus a trad-cert one. (Some suggest alt-certs are slightly better at teaching math but slightly worse at teaching English, for instance.) And whatever differences there are at the start, they tend to fade quickly as both kinds of teachers gain experience.

There are, of course, lots of differences between teaching and journalism. Being a journalist doesn't require a license from the state (thankfully) or any official credential. The labor demand for journalists is a lot weaker than for teachers.

And let's be honest: Quality control is more important for teachers than for journalists. Having a bad teacher for just one or two years can throw off a kid's entire education. A classroom teacher might only affect 30 kids a year, but that impact can be intense and long-lasting.

Meanwhile, having a D-minus general assignment reporter working for your local daily newspaper isn't ideal, obviously, but it's unlikely to destroy any reader's life. If someone can't hack it in a newsroom, they'll either move on or be asked to.

IV

So, what would an "alternative certification" program that makes sense for journalism look like?

The most famous teacher alt-cert program is Teach for America, so one might think of the analogous Report for America, which currently places hundreds of young journalists into local newsrooms around the country, picking up part of the tab.

I think Report for America is terrific, and they should be vigorously applauded for placing reporters who are waaaay more diverse than the newsrooms they're entering — or, frankly, than who those newsrooms would be hiring on their own. (Forty-five percent of the current group are people of color.)

But RFA is aimed at someone with more experience than your typical J-school master's student. "Corps members are typically emerging journalists with a few years of experience," the site's FAQ says. "We want people who can have an impact on Day One, which means some meaningful journalism experience."

There are J-schools that offer programs more contained than a full master's degree, like CUNY's J+. But those are typically aimed more at "working journalists … who want to advance in their careers" rather than someone lower on the experience ladder. And a certificate for completing a single course isn't likely to be the line on your resume that makes the hiring editor take notice.

It's very true (and The Mizzou Grads would like you to remember) that you can't look at journalism education solely through the lens of a Columbia or a Northwestern. There are public universities that can get you a degree at a more reasonable price — especially if you don't need to move to campus. An online master's from Mizzou will cost you about $34,000 in tuition. Arizona State's Cronkite School will run you $19,964; West Virginia, $18,010.

Still, that's a financial commitment — and a structured-time commitment — that's hard for a lot of people. And while some colleges have seen the pandemic as an opportunity to lean more into online programs, most will charge you roughly the same for an online master's as for an in-person one. (The online master's in journalism innovation at Syracuse's Newhouse School, for example, runs $64,812.) And many still expect you to take a full schedule of classes, making maintaining your day job more difficult.

For an alt-cert program in journalism to work, it would need to:

- **Be cheap.** I'm talking low four digits, not low six digits.
- **Be available anywhere.** Don't make people uproot their lives.
- **Be flexible in terms of time.** So people can keep their jobs and the schedules of their lives.
- **Allow for some degree of networking.** Faces to go with names.
- **Have some amount of institutional prestige.** If hiring editors don't view it as a valuable credential, it's not worth it.

I have a model in mind.

The degree program that you probably associate with the Harvard Business School is, of course, the MBA. The HBS estimate for how much that two-year program will cost you is an eye-watering $223,084. (That's $146,880 in tuition, $15,664 in "required fees," and an estimated $60,540 in indirect expenses — basically, cost of living.) Around 9,000 people apply for admission in a typical year, and they end up with an incoming class of a bit over 900.

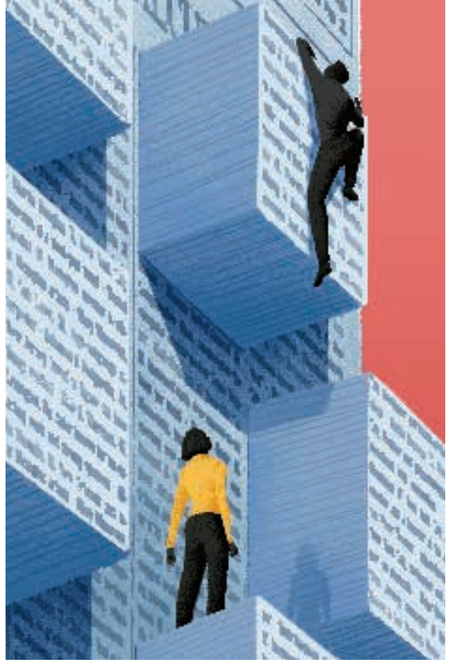
That's a price tag that would put any J-school to shame. It's a very-high-end program, with very-high-end costs and very-high-end benefits. But HBS also offers another program — one that actually enrolls many more students each year than its MBA. It's called the Harvard Business School Credential of Readiness, or CORe. It's delivered entirely online; it includes courses on business analytics, financial accounting, and economics. It's not meant to be your full-time job; HBS estimates it'll require between 8 and 15 hours of work a week, and it's offered over time periods ranging from 10 to 17 weeks.

And it all only costs a flat $2,250.

Now, would someone learn as much in 17 weeks of CORe as in two years of the MBA program? Of course not. But that MBA will cost you literally 100 times CORe's tuition. And CORe can reach a ton more people; in its first five years, it enrolled nearly 28,000 students. And you can do CORe from anywhere in the world instead of uprooting your life for the privilege of paying Cambridge rent for two years.

It would be crazy if Harvard only offered a $2,250 online course. But it also doesn't make sense for it to only run a program that can only impact 900 new people each year.

Is CORe as meaningful on a resume as an HBS MBA? Of course it isn't. But "I took 150 hours of



Harvard Business School courses in Business Analytics, Economics for Managers, and Financial Accounting, passed a final exam, and received High Honors" is far from meaningless. That will stand out in a stack of PDFs.

Is the networking available to a CORe graduate as valuable as to an MBA grad? No, but they do build in structures for working with your peers that students seem to find genuinely valuable.

Something like that is, I think, what journalism education needs: a new low-cost credential that can open up possibilities for a lot of the people for whom traditional paths don't work.

V

Who's going to start a CORe for journalism?

An existing journalism school would be an obvious option. Maybe the Columbias and Northwesterns would be hesitant to invest in something that could disrupt their biggest and most important offering. But if Harvard Business School can do it without any harm their MBA program's prestige, I don't see why a top J-school wouldn't be able to.

There are a few J-schools that have stood out to me for their hustle, their willingness to try new things — Arizona State, CUNY, and Northeastern come to mind, and I'm sure there are plenty I don't know about. They'd be logical choices. So would an HBCU like Howard, which has been making big news as of late.

And perhaps it could use an external source of esteem-signaling to emphasize the quality of the program. Would a major foundation — Knight most obviously, but also the Fords, Carnegies, MacArthurs, and so on — be willing to fund such a program and attach its name to it? Call it the Knight-Cronkite program — or the Carnegie-Medill, or the Hewlett-Annenberg, or whatever.

Perhaps a major news organization would want to attach its name and resources to a worthy effort to diversify journalism's ranks. It's not uncommon in Europe for news organizations to be more directly connected to journalism training; think of the BBC Academy or the Henri-Nannen-Schule, which is run by the German publishers Gruner + Jahr, Der Spiegel, and Die Zeit.

Some might worry that creating this sort of lower-cost option would be like creating two class-based tracks — one for the rich, one for the poor. I'm sympathetic to that concern. But no one is saying shut down all the master's programs — they'd still be an option, as much of an option as they are today. There would just be another choice for the resource-constrained. And that's why it's important that it be high quality from the start, not built by some sketchy online-ed company.

I can't pretend that this wouldn't require a lot of work to build. But designing a strong online program — with a defined set of courses and a repeatable design — is a lot easier than, say, building an entire department or college from scratch.

And let's be frank: The news industry's record on building and supporting a diverse workforce is pathetic. And their record on hiring people from low-income and working-class backgrounds is no better.

(It's surprisingly hard to get data on the class backgrounds of American journalists, but I suspect our situation is a lot like the U.K.'s. There, in the general population, there are roughly three working-class adults for every one upper-middle-class or higher adult. But in the journalism and publishing industry, it's reversed: roughly three employees from upper-middle-plus backgrounds for every one from a working-class background.)

The more that journalism is reserved for elites, the less representative it is of our country — and the easier it is for everyone else not to trust us. The World Wide Web was supposed to democratize publishing — giving every citizen the ability to do something previously limited to those with printing presses. But professional journalism has become less representative and more driven by an educational and class elite than it was in the days of ink-stained wretches.

Some (not all) journalism schools have done good work trying to push back against that trend. But maybe it's time for the profession to build a new path into the industry — not just tweak the old ones. ■

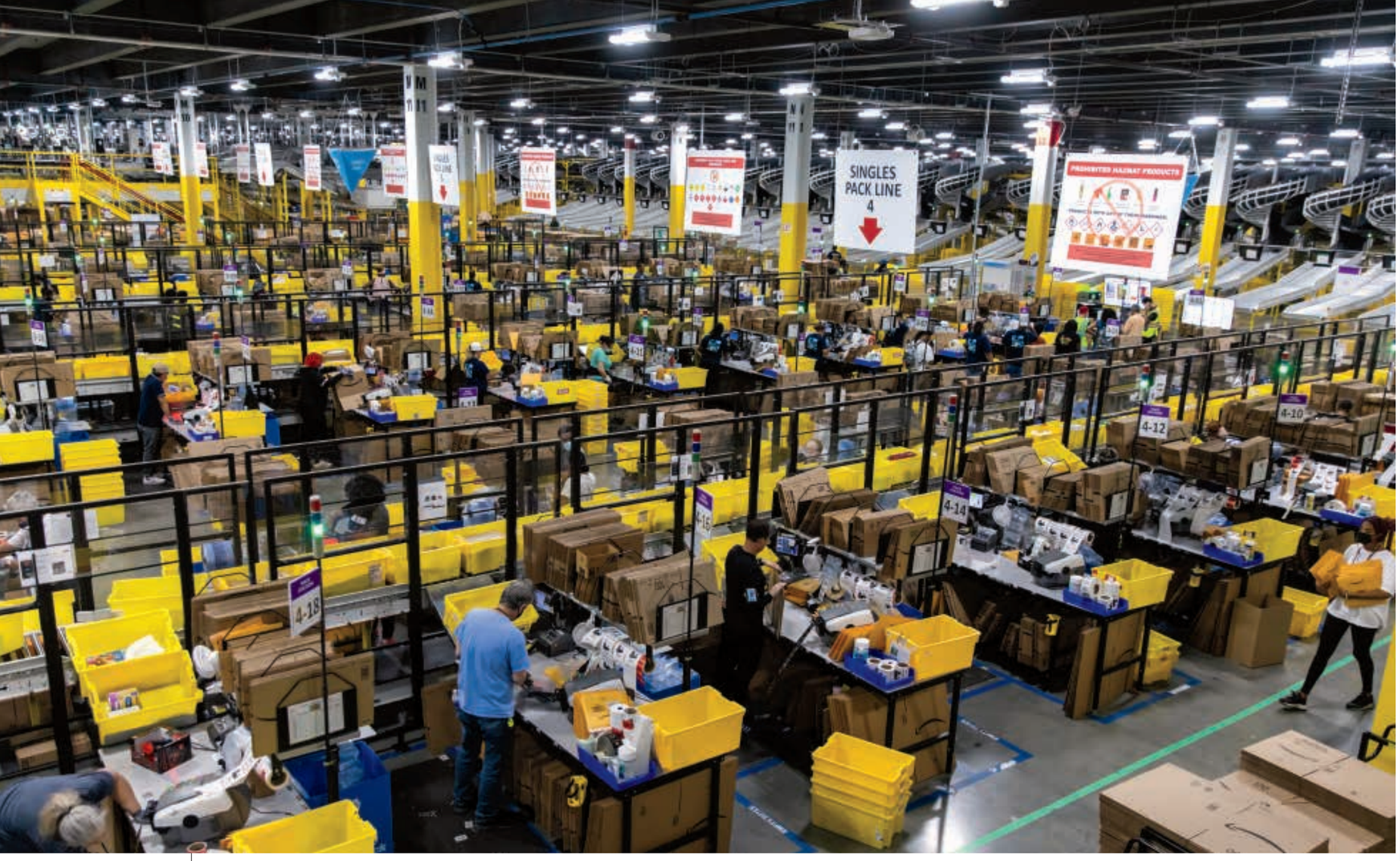
FOR AN ALT-CERT JOURNALISM PROGRAM TO WORK IT WOULD NEED TO BE CHEAP. I'M TALKING LOW FOUR DIGITS, NOT LOW SIX DIGITS

THE LABOR BEAT* IS BACK

The pandemic has brought new urgency to labor issues — and fresh coverage of the changing nature of work

BY STEVE GREENHOUSE

* Now also known as the 'labor and workplace beat'



Amazon workers fulfill orders on Prime Day in Raleigh, North Carolina, in June 2021. In the past year, labor stories about poor working conditions have badly embarassed the company

PREVIOUS SPREAD: Starbucks workers celebrate their union victory on Dec. 9, in Buffalo, N.Y. They voted to unionize despite company objections, creating a new labor model for the coffee giant

IN HER SIX YEARS AS A REPORTER at The Courier in Waterloo, Iowa, Amie Rivers has mainly covered politics and local news. In the weeks before the pandemic hit in March 2020, she wrote stories about a real estate agent announcing plans to run for an Iowa House seat and about the police arresting a man who was found asleep at the wheel at a red light.

But soon after Covid-19 hit, Rivers focused on an outbreak at Tyson's huge pork-processing plant in town. First, she wrote about workers' suspicions that there was a Covid outbreak, and she soon followed that with larger stories about how Tyson's crowded working conditions had let the virus rip through the plant's 2,800 workers. The national media jumped on the story that Rivers broke, and in May, about 1,000 of the plant's workers tested positive.

"We started getting these tips from people," Rivers said. "They were really worried about getting sick, and they didn't think their employer was doing anything about it. Right away that set off alarm bells."

PREVIOUS SPREAD: JOSHUA BESSEX/AP PHOTO
ABOVE: RACHEL JESSEN/BLOOMBERG PHOTO VIA GETTY

Recognizing that the Covid outbreak at Tyson was an important labor story, Rivers and her editors jumped on it even though their paper covered labor issues only infrequently before the pandemic. After years of cutbacks, only a handful of reporters remained at the Courier, and as with many financially battered newsrooms, labor coverage was an early casualty of the paper's downsizing. The labor beat, which in the decades after World War II was considered a marquee assignment, began to fade away along with the power and prominence of the unions being covered.

But in the last dozen years, there has been a resurgence of the labor beat, largely fueled by two developments: the Great Recession, which saw the jobless rate jump to 10 percent, and the rise of digital media, which often tilts to the left and has many readers who are interested in how American workers are treated — or mistreated. In 2020, as the pandemic took hold, labor stories became many of the nation's biggest news stories: the millions of workers laid off when businesses shuttered temporarily, the risks facing grocery and transit workers, the dangers facing health care workers, the abuse flight attendants receive from passengers refusing to wear masks, the work-from-home revolution, the many frightened teachers who wanted their schools closed. More recently, other pandemic-related labor stories have leapt onto the front page, including the debate over vaccine mandates for workers, the labor shortage in many industries, and the record number of Americans quitting their jobs in what has been called the Great Resignation. "The pandemic has really been a galvanizing event in terms of labor coverage," said Christopher Martin, a professor of digital journalism at the University of Northern Iowa.

With the flood of workplace stories in this unprecedented moment, it seems likely that labor coverage will remain strong and perhaps even grow. In decades past, labor reporters usually focused on covering labor unions, their strikes, and contract negotiations. Today, the beat has expanded to include everything from how Uber treats its drivers to some Amazon workers not having enough time to go to the bathroom to issues like the #MeToo movement, work-family balance, and the lack of childcare. During the pandemic, traditional concepts of office work have been radically altered and the relationships between employers and employees have changed, as well. All this is raising broader questions that journalists will need to cover: Will many white-collar workers never return to the office? Will the labor shortages accelerate the introduction of new automation? Will pandemic-battered workers increasingly seek to unionize, as we've seen at Starbucks and Amazon? Will the Great Resignation cause American corporations to treat their workers better?

IN NEWSPAPERS ACROSS THE United States, the labor beat once had a major presence, whether it was covering the Flint sit-down strike in the 1930s, corruption in the Teamsters in the 1950s, the rise of Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers in the 1960s, or Ronald Reagan crushing the air traffic controllers' strike in 1981. The beat solidified during the 1930s and the Great Depression, when there was an explosion of strikes and workplace protests and landmark New Deal legislation was enacted, leading to a burst of unionization at auto plants, steel mills, coal mines, and many other worksites.

Louis Stark, who was The New York Times' labor beat reporter at the time, became a model with his in-depth articles about sit-down strikes, new labor legislation, and fierce union battles in Harlan County, Kentucky. In 1942, Stark won a Pulitzer Prize for his "distinguished reporting of important labor stories." In the late 1940s and early 1950s, there was tremendous labor turmoil, with more than 400 large strikes some years. At times, labor was the nation's dominant story, whether it was a nationwide rail strike, a coal miners' walkout, or President Truman seeking to seize the nation's steel mills in 1952. Many days,

“IN THE PANDEMIC, WORKPLACE SAFETY BECAME AN A-1 STORY ALL OVER THE PLACE. IT WAS THE BIGGEST WORKPLACE SAFETY CRISIS WE’VE HAD IN DECADES”

DAVE JAMIESON, HUFFPOST LABOR REPORTER

newspapers ran several labor stories on their front page. I remember counting seven labor stories on a New York Times front page from the late 1940s.

But the labor beat began a steep decline late last century. Starting in the 1970s, as newspaper chains acquired family-owned papers, and as many executives with MBAs moved into the publisher’s suite, newspapers increasingly targeted affluent, college-educated, and suburban readers (whom advertisers wanted to reach). At the same time, they cut back coverage that targeted working-class readers. As a result, Martin has written, there were fewer stories about labor and more stories about food, travel, lifestyle, and how to invest — stories geared to upscale readers. In his book, “No Longer Newsworthy: How the Mainstream Media Abandoned the Working Class,” Martin notes that many newspaper executives opted to focus on “quality demographics” rather than mass circulation.

Another reason for the decline in labor coverage was that the percentage of workers in unions slid from 35 percent in the mid 1950s to about 10 percent today. Moreover, factory jobs — which were long organized labor’s base — went from representing more than 3 in 10 non-farm jobs to less than 1 in 10 today, a slide caused by factory automation, manufacturing moving overseas, and many plants closing due to competition from imports. Paralleling this decline in factory jobs was a sharp decline in the number of strikes, and that, too, contributed to a decrease in labor coverage.

As factory jobs declined, there was a boom in service-sector jobs — in fast-food, retail, hotels, and other sectors — and those jobs, which were often low-wage jobs, became more important to the economy and to the news. “Sometime in the 1990s you began to get labor coverage not about union workers, but about what’s going on at McDonald’s, what’s going on at Walmart,” says Nelson Lichtenstein, a long-time labor history professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

As newsrooms downsized and searched for new audiences, the labor beat — long viewed as unsexy — was often one of the first to go. Seeing their positions disappear, some labor beat reporters complained that their news organizations were focusing increasingly on celebrity news and gossip to get clicks. Many newspapers, Martin notes, moved their labor coverage into the business section and reshaped the beat to focus on subjects like job training and how to maintain employee morale. The coverage became less about how labor unions could help workers through collective action and more about how individuals could elevate their career — stories, for instance, about how to ask for a raise or a promotion or about finding time to get an MBA. When it came to labor developments, business editors often wanted reporters to focus on how they affected companies and their share prices, says Stephen Franklin, who used to write about labor for the Detroit Free Press and the Chicago Tribune. “They weren’t very interested in workers,” he says, noting that some business editors had a hostile attitude toward unions.

By 2010 or so, the labor beat had fallen to a low point: The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, the Los Angeles Times, the Chicago Tribune, and many other daily newspapers no longer had full-time labor beat reporters. (For a while, I, at The New York Times, was the only full-time daily labor beat reporter left.)

After several decades of decline, the labor beat began a slow rebound about a decade ago — a rebound that continues to this day. As the Great Recession unfolded, many editors recognized that the predicament faced by millions of jobless workers was an important story. Without labor beat reporters, editors often turned to economics or general assignment reporters to cover the plight of the unemployed.

Around the same time, a group of digital-native publications began covering the beat. In 2011, HuffPost asked Dave Jamieson to be its full-time labor reporter. Not long after, Vice, Vox, and BuzzFeed added labor reporters. These new digital reporters deepened the nation’s labor coverage, writing, for instance, about Uber Eats delivery workers often not receiving the tips that customers gave and why women are underrepresented in Silicon Valley engineering jobs. Victor Narro, a professor of labor studies at UCLA, says, “The emergence of labor coverage in digital media has pushed the likes of the L.A. Times and other publications to reinvest in labor coverage, which had not been a priority.”

FOR THE PAST DECADE, Jamieson has written roughly 150 labor stories a year, covering everything from the John Deere and teachers’ strikes, to maskless shoppers endangering retail workers during the pandemic, to postal workers dying from heat stroke in 110-degree weather. The beat was busy before the pandemic, but since March 2020, the focus on workers and workplace safety has intensified.

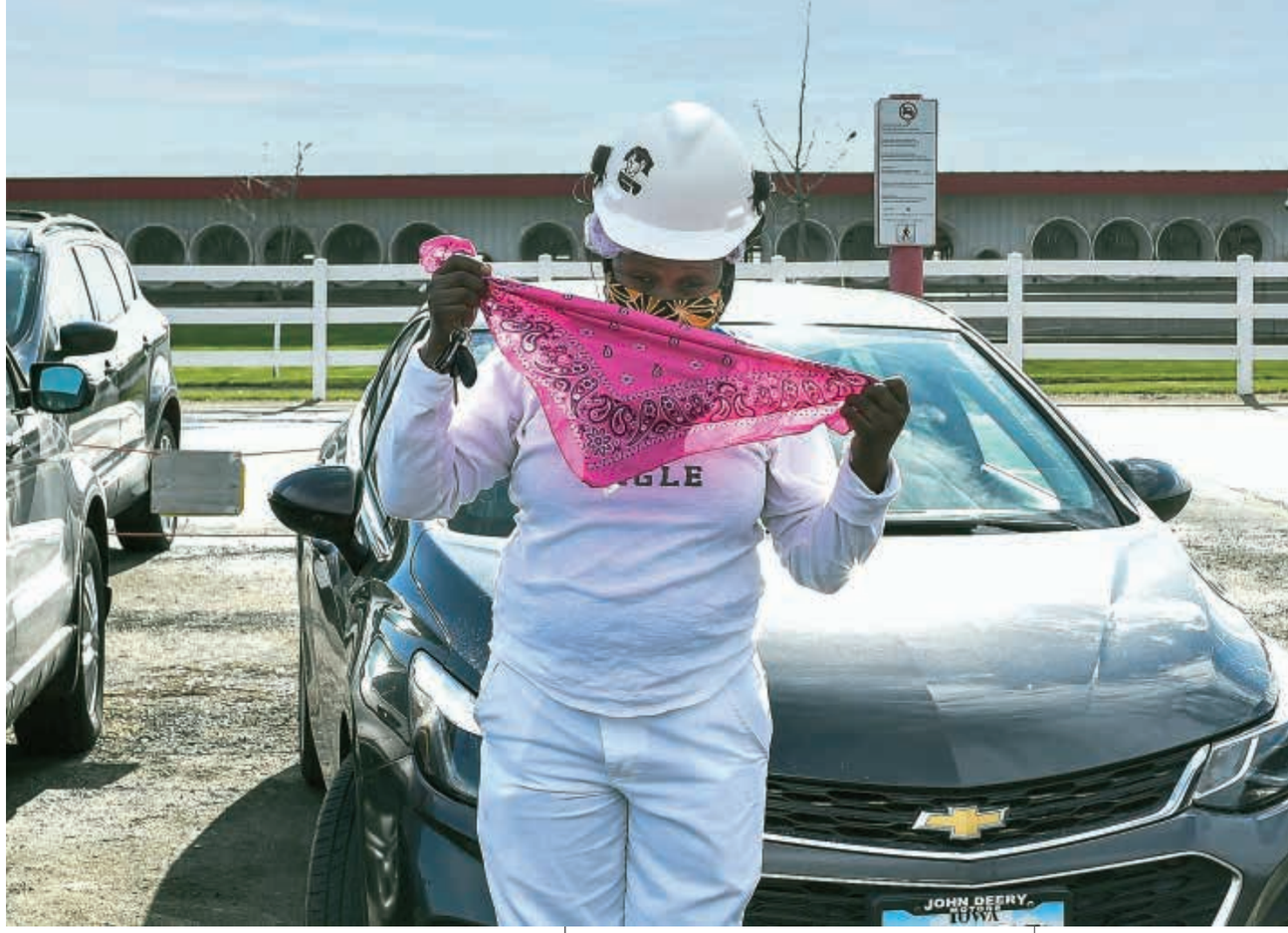
“In the pandemic, workplace safety became an A-1 story all over the place,” Jamieson says. “It was the biggest workplace safety crisis we’ve had in decades.”

Concerned about the pandemic’s effects on “essential” workers, Jennifer Gonnerman, a writer for The New Yorker who usually covers criminal justice and urban affairs, decided to do an in-depth profile of a New York City bus driver and the perils he faced. More than 100 New York transit workers have died from Covid. “The class divide in the country became crystal clear,” says Gonnerman. “Wealthy people left the city, and white-collar workers were working from home and Zooming in. Essential workers — bus drivers, nurses, delivery workers, and thousands of others — kept the city going. I felt we really needed to understand their lives.” She profiled Terence Layne, a 55-year-old bus driver whose father died of Covid-19. Her profile won a National Magazine Award.

“When the pandemic hit, everybody became a labor and workplace reporter,” says Noam Scheiber, The New York Times’ labor workplace reporter. “If you covered Google or Amazon or Uber or retail or the subways or public sector workers, you became a labor reporter.” Retail reporters like Michael Corkery at The Times, Abha Bhattarai at The Washington Post, and Nathaniel Meyersohn at CNN Business all wrote repeatedly on Covid-19’s impact on workers. There were stories about retailers refusing to require customers to wear masks even though that could endanger their employees and about CEOs getting large payouts while their companies did not give hazard pay to the essential workers who showed up day after day to serve customers.

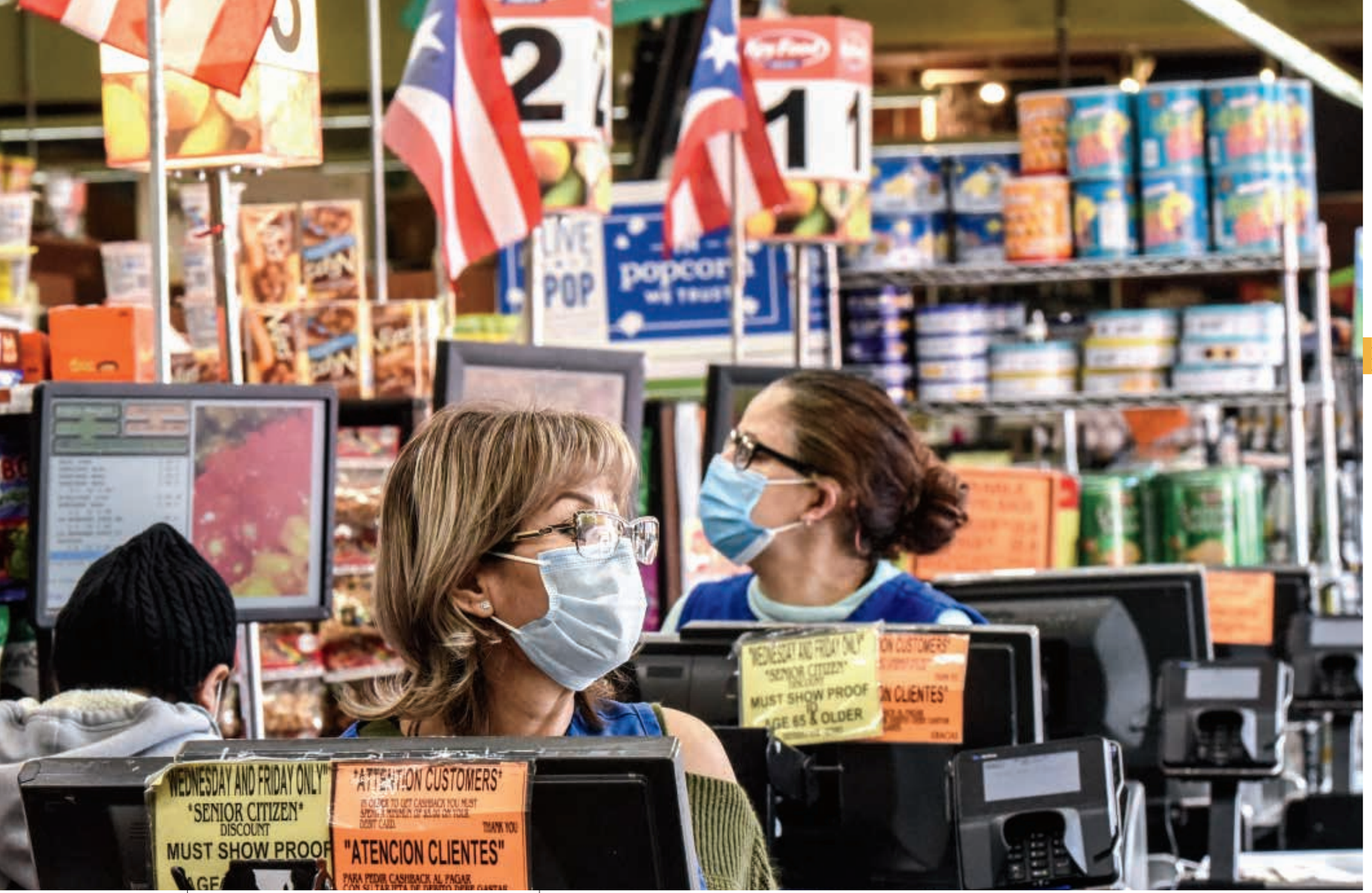
The pandemic laid bare the harsh reality faced by millions of low-wage workers. Many need more than one job just to afford basic necessities, often lack paid sick days to care for themselves or family members, and typically struggle to find affordable childcare — topics the media has covered with heightened urgency during the pandemic. “One of the striking things about the coronavirus,” says Josh Eidelson, the labor reporter for Bloomberg News and Bloomberg Businessweek, “is how it touched every sort of workplace, in unequal ways and with unequal consequences.” Eidelson’s pandemic stories have included the problems with employer gag rules that prohibit workers from telling their coworkers that they contracted Covid-19 and how the nation’s fractured unemployment insurance system failed millions of workers laid off during the pandemic.

Another issue reporters are grappling with is, what does it mean that white-collar workers are transitioning away from the traditional office and working remotely in far greater numbers than ever before? Thousands of office workers have moved to scenic locales hundreds of miles from their downtown offices, and many will resent orders to return to the office. Meanwhile, as Washington Post labor reporter Eli Rosenberg writes, even as workers at some companies return to the office, office life might never be the same. Workers describe a strange, changed office environment — “a world of complicated social interactions, lingering anxieties about masks and vaccinations, and simmering frustrations about inflexible work policies.”



JEFFREY BECKER /USA TODAY SPORTS VIA REUTERS

A Tyson employee puts on a second mask outside the company’s meat processing plant in Waterloo, Iowa. Crowded working conditions led to a Covid-19 outbreak at the plant and became national news



Cashiers wearing protective masks work in a grocery store in Brooklyn in April 2020. Workplace safety has become a main topic for labor reporters during Covid-19

STEPHANIE KEITH/STRINGER VIA GETTY

In recent months, the pandemic-inspired boom in labor coverage has grown even bigger for two reasons. First, there has been a surge of strikes and threats to strike at John Deere, Kellogg's, Nabisco, Kaiser Permanente, and numerous other companies as many workers, after facing considerable risks at their jobs during the pandemic, felt frustrated, unappreciated, and even angry that their employers were not being far more generous in contract negotiations. Second, record numbers of workers have been quitting their jobs in what economists are calling "the Great Resignation." Labor reporters, economics reporters, and others have rushed to cover this phenomenon: Why are so many workers quitting and what does it mean for the economy, employers, and the nation's supply chain? There are many reasons to explain why more than 4 million workers have been quitting their jobs each month recently, among them a lack of affordable childcare, but the biggest reason is that the labor shortage in some industries has given millions of workers a welcome opportunity to jump to jobs that pay them more and treat them better.

FOR LABOR BEAT REPORTERS of yesteryear, their agenda was largely set by labor unions: a strike threat against United States Steel or making increased pensions their main contract demand. But today, the agenda is broader and usually set by the reporter, often with a focus on income inequality and injustice. That can mean stories about the pay gap for women, higher unemployment rates for African Americans, the higher fatality rate for Hispanic construction workers, and how a lack of childcare keeps women out of the workforce.

"I've always seen the beat not so much as union-focused, but one encompassing economic justice and workplace conditions — and about relations between employers and workers," says Margot Roosevelt, an L.A. Times economics, labor, and workplace reporter. "The issues around inequality are of tremendous interest to our editors up and down the masthead. Any focus on those issues is central to understanding what's happening in this country today, not just economically, but socially and politically." As a nod to that reality, some labor reporters have renamed their beat, "labor and workplace reporter."

"I'VE ALWAYS SEEN THE BEAT NOT SO MUCH AS UNION-FOCUSED, BUT ONE ENCOMPASSING ECONOMIC JUSTICE AND WORKPLACE CONDITIONS"

MARGOT ROOSEVELT, L.A. TIMES REPORTER

Long before the pandemic, the beat was expanding to include many non-union stories like how to deal with bullying bosses, the problems college graduates face finding jobs, farmworkers toiling in 100-degree heat, why Amazon has such a high employee turnover rate, and whether the advent of self-driving cars will throw many Uber and Lyft drivers out of jobs. The labor beat also now includes covering racial discrimination and sexual harassment. #MeToo stories are an undeniable type of labor coverage: They're largely about men harassing or abusing women who work for them — or, as with Harvey Weinstein, women who wanted to be hired by them.

Labor stories can take many forms. Juliana Feliciano Reyes did an unusual labor story for The Philadelphia Inquirer that went viral: why Philadelphia men list their union membership on Tinder. One of the answers, Reyes explained, was they think the good pay and benefits that union workers get will attract potential partners. When Reyes started in the role, the beat and title was "the culture of the workplace," but over time her coverage reverted to more traditional labor stories.

With an eye to wooing young readers, some editors see a definite upside to workplace coverage. Many young Americans have been inspired by Bernie Sanders and the Fight for $15, have had problems in the job market, and are unionizing, whether they are grad students, museum workers, digital journalists, or more recently, Starbucks baristas. Indeed, a recent Gallup poll found that 77 percent of Americans between 18 and 34 approve of unions, as do 68 percent of all American adults — the highest level in decades.

Many major newspapers and many digital news organizations now have reporters dedicated to the beat. Last April, National Public Radio named Andrea Hsu as its "labor and workplace correspondent." Beyond the mainstream media, there are reporters covering labor at many progressive and leftist publications, including In These Times, Jacobin, Dissent, the American

"WE NEED 300 MORE LABOR JOURNALISTS, BUT THERE AREN'T JOBS FOR THEM"

SARAH JAFFE, A LEADING LABOR JOURNALIST

Prospect, Labor Notes, The Progressive, Payday Report, Strikewave, and The Nation.

Lauren Kaori Gurley, a labor reporter at Vice's Motherboard since 2019, has probably had more big scoops on the beat than anyone else over the past year. Her scoops include leaked audio of Amazon workers challenging and grilling managers who were attacking unions at an Amazon anti-union meeting and McDonald's having a secretive intelligence team that spied on workers active in the Fight for $15.

"It's gotten more competitive," Gurley says. "There's a competition for publishing stories first." There's also competition to get the highest impact stories. After Amazon denied allegations that its delivery drivers ever peed into bottles, Gurley posted a story about Amazon drivers who did just that. Several drivers used social media to send her photos of their urine-filled bottles and told Gurley that they had to deliver so many Amazon packages each day that they often didn't have time to find bathrooms. Her story went viral and badly embarrassed Amazon.

As the beat has shifted to focus more on income inequity and power imbalances, some reporters — for instance, Jonah Furman, a writer for Labor Notes — acknowledge that they consider themselves activists as well as journalists. Seeing how powerful and wealthy corporations are and seeing the nation's immense income inequality, they want not just to write about workers, but to advance their cause. Furman says that his definition of labor journalist "doesn't fit The New York Times version of labor journalist." For example, in an article he co-wrote about a threatened strike at Kaiser Permanente, the giant health care provider, he called Kaiser's offer of a 1 percent raise "piddling" and its arguments for a two-tier pay structure "bogus." Beyond his writing duties, Furman helps organize workshops that teach labor activists how to be more effective.

While most other labor journalists don't consider themselves activists, they often admit to being sympathetic to workers on workplace issues. One trend that is making journalists better understand the tumult workers face is what's been happening to newspapers across the nation: corporate acquisitions and newsroom downsizing. The Courier in Waterloo went from an editorial staff of around two dozen to just five; HuffPost's bargaining unit from around 250 to about 80. "It helps you understand the turbulence that many workers are facing," Jamieson says. (See sidebar: Newsrooms Are Unionizing Pretty Much "Nonstop." Here's Why)

Sarah Jaffe, a leading labor journalist, remembers that when she was just out of graduate school 12 years ago, it was hard to get assignments to do labor stories, even from publications on the left. But, she says, it became considerably easier to get such assignments thanks to three tumultuous developments: the colossal battle in Wisconsin in 2011 over then-Gov. Scott Walker's push to hobble public sector unions, the Chicago teachers' strike of 2012, and the birth of the Fight for $15, which held its first strikes in 2012. "Each one of those made it easier to explain to people why we should care about this organizing drive or this strike or these questions involving workers," Jaffe says. Now, she often writes for The Progressive and The Nation and co-hosts a podcast, "Belabored," which is presented by Dissent magazine.

Despite the increased number of journalists on the beat, some labor reporters say there still aren't enough people covering the topic, especially in places that aren't New York City or Washington, D.C. "There's ... a lot of coverage still lacking all over the place," says Jamieson. "There's a lot less than there was in small and midsized papers." Jaffe agrees, noting that many labor freelancers can't find full-time writing jobs. "We need 300 more labor journalists, but there aren't jobs for them."

For now, social media is helping to fill the gap. Through Twitter especially, reporters can deliver or receive minute-to-minute updates on strikes and other protests across the country. Through a steady stream of tweets as well as some on-the-scene articles, Kim Kelly, who writes a freelance labor column for Teen Vogue, has gotten many journalists far outside of Alabama to pay attention to the strike by more than 1,000 Warrior Met Coal miners that began April 1.

Edward Ongweso Jr. frequently finds himself writing stories about labor even though he is a tech industry reporter at Vice's Motherboard. Ongweso says lots of important labor stories pop up at tech companies, whether at Amazon, Uber, Google, or video game companies. "Sometimes it's 'let's surveil every worker,'" he says. "Sometimes it's 'let's snuff out any dissent.' Sometimes it's 'let's develop some really repressive union-busting techniques.' There's so much to write about labor."

Martin, the professor at the University of Northern Iowa, is delighted to see the revival, however incomplete, of the labor beat. "It's good for connecting with a potentially very big audience, an audience I've argued that has been forsaken for many decades," he says. But he fears that when the pandemic ends and the "Great Resignation" is just a memory, labor coverage will once again recede. In his view, that would be bad for the nation and its future, undermining our ability to understand what's happening with America's economy and its 155 million workers. ■

NEWSROOMS ARE UNIONIZING PRETTY MUCH "NONSTOP." HERE'S WHY

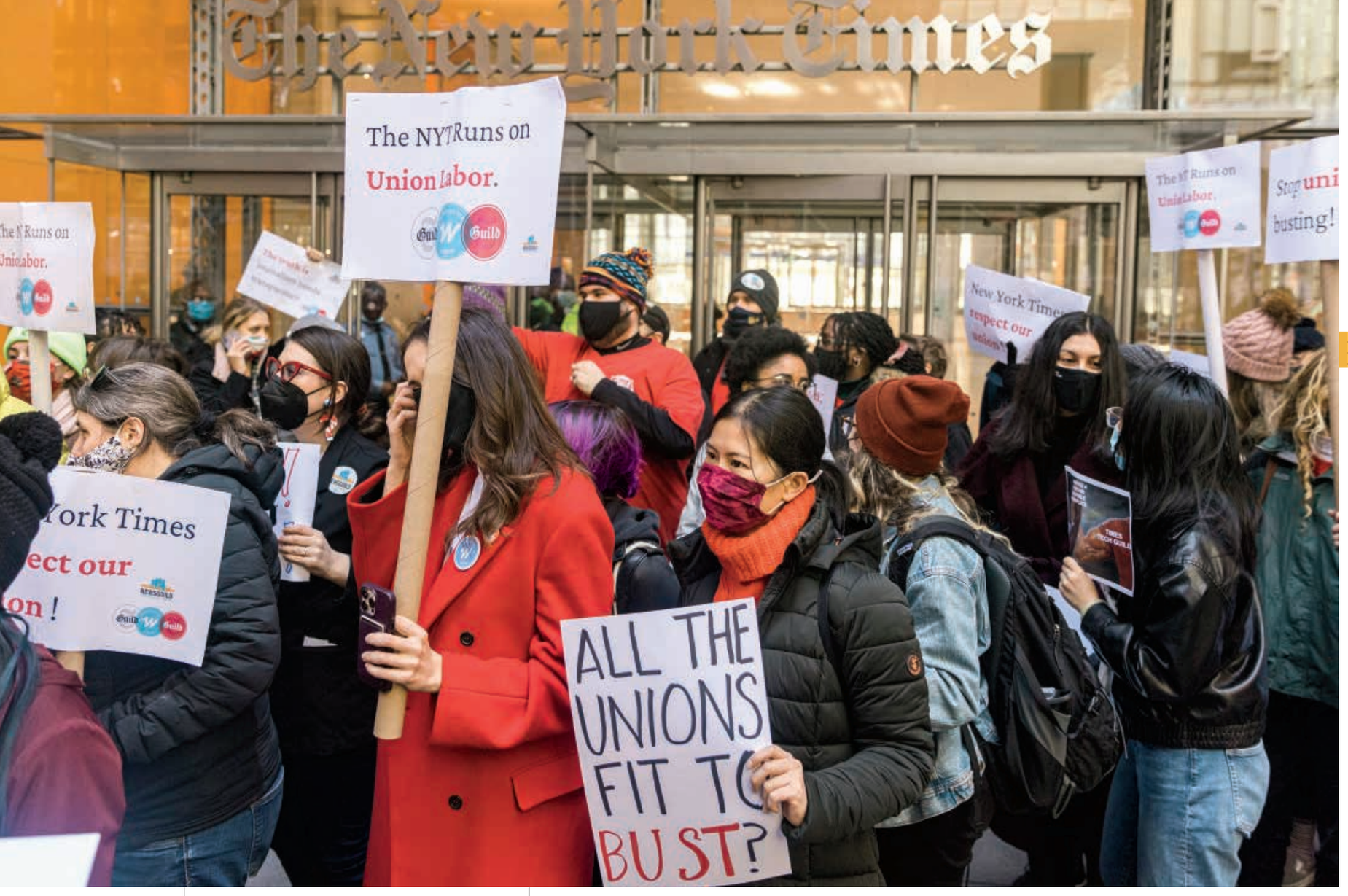
Journalists are responding to consolidation and ongoing revenue challenges by joining the unionization wave BY STEVE GREENHOUSE

MIKE KELLY HAS WORKED AT THE RECORD FOR 46 YEARS, and until Gannett acquired the New Jersey newspaper in 2016, he saw little need for a union.

But that changed once Gannett arrived. Kelly, a columnist for The Record, says Gannett chopped the newsroom's staff from 190 in 2016 to 100 today and fired many of his fellow journalists in demeaning, callous ways.

"Our nationally known baseball writer was fired just eight hours after the last out of the World Series," Kelly says. "One of our best investigative reporters — a Pulitzer finalist who was one of the first to expose Trump's questionable deals in the New Jersey Meadowlands — was given just a few hours to clear out of the building."

"I watched too many decent people stripped of their professional dignity," Kelly continues. "We were watching our colleagues just pushed out the door willy-nilly and without any warning. I get that the newspaper business is in financial crisis. But you don't take a person with 35 years experience and say you have an hour or [so] to clean out your desk. It's not right."



Wirecutter union members protest outside of The New York Times' headquarters in Nov. 2021. They got their first contract after two years of contentious negotiations

JEENAH MOON/NEW YORK TIMES VIA REDUX

Dismayed by the repeated rounds of layoffs, The Record's newsroom employees (together with journalists at nearby Gannett-owned papers, the Daily Record of Morris County and the New Jersey Herald of Sussex County) voted 59 to 4 to unionize with The NewsGuild in May 2021. The papers were part of a unionization wave that has grown larger since journalists at Gawker Media became, in 2015, the first major digital media company to unionize. In the six years since, spurred by layoffs, increasing workloads, and even the pandemic, more than 100 news organizations have unionized, swelling the ranks of The NewsGuild, which has added about 6,300 new members over the past four years, and the Writers Guild of America, East, which has organized about 2,400 journalists since 2016. For these journalists, unionization has often meant higher minimum salaries, regularly scheduled raises, improved health coverage, greater protections against dismissal, and increased severance pay. The new unions have also pushed to increase diversity in newsrooms and eliminate pay gaps hurting women and minority journalists.

"People see other campaigns winning unionization votes and winning good contracts," says Jon Schleuss, the NewsGuild's president. "That has helped this spread like a wildfire, with people asking, 'Would a union be possible here?'"

"PEOPLE SEE OTHER CAMPAIGNS WINNING UNIONIZATION VOTES AND WINNING GOOD CONTRACTS. THAT HAS HELPED THIS SPREAD LIKE A WILDFIRE"

JON SCHLEUSS, NEWSGUILD PRESIDENT

Hamilton Nolan, who was Gawker's labor reporter, spearheaded the trend-setting union drive there at a time when many Gawker writers and editors were unhappy with the tradeoff the company offered: You get to do cool, fun work, but we're not going to let you have a say in the company.

Immediately after Nolan announced the unionization effort, an unusually transparent debate erupted as Gawker employees posted their pro-union and anti-union positions online, making their dialogue accessible to the public. Explaining why he wanted a union, Nolan says: "You can talk about getting better wages, better benefits, editorial protections, all those important things, but regardless of how good your job is, if you're not working under a contract, you'll always be at the mercy of your boss if you don't have a union."

A big, unexpected factor helped the union effort: Gawker's founder, Nick Denton — unlike many corporate executives — didn't mount an anti-union campaign. Rather, Denton said he was "intensely relaxed" about it. In June 2015, Gawker's employees voted, 80 to 27, to unionize with the Writers Guild. (Gawker Media, which also owned Jezebel, Deadspin, Gizmodo, and Jalopnik, went bankrupt in 2016 after losing a privacy lawsuit to Hulk Hogan.)

Within months of Gawker unionizing, journalists at HuffPost, Salon, Vice Media, and the Guardian US followed suit. By the end of 2018, 30 digital news outlets had unionized, along with what were long seen as the nation's two most anti-union newspapers, the Los Angeles Times and the Chicago Tribune. The union wave soon swept up several prestigious magazines: The New Yorker, New York, and The New Republic.

Over the past few years, this wave has continued unabated. Journalists at The Atlantic and Forbes voted to unionize, as did over 500 workers from 28 Hearst publications, including Cosmopolitan, Esquire, and Good Housekeeping. Last June, editorial employees at the Insider website (formerly Business Insider) voted to unionize, 241-14, and in November, over 250 employees at Politico received union recognition. Slate, The Intercept, Talking Points Memo, Thrillist, Refinery29, and Chalkbeat, the education website, have also unionized. Writers and producers at The Ringer and Gimlet Media, two podcast giants, have unionized, as have numerous public radio stations, including WBUR in Boston and WHYY in Philadelphia, both of whose workers joined SAG-AFTRA, the giant union for radio, television, and movie workers.

"It's pretty much ongoing nonstop," says Nolan. "If anything has changed in the past few years, it's the conventional wisdom around unions in the media. There was a time when in every conversation about organizing, people felt they were taking a big leap and

they were really going out on a limb, but that has been mitigated to a large degree."

Two major forces have propelled the unionization wave: the industry's financial crisis and the wave of acquisitions, wiping out thousands of jobs and clamping down on salaries. Corporate owners like Gannett, GateHouse Media, and Alden Global Capital have sharply cut newsroom staffing and consolidated copy-editing, layout, and graphics departments. In 2019, the firm that owns GateHouse purchased Gannett, forming a colossal chain with around 500 publications. Last May, Alden acquired Tribune Publishing and along with it, the Chicago Tribune, The Baltimore Sun, Hartford Courant, and the Daily News. Journalists at Tribune publications were so alarmed that Alden — which is often called a "vulture" hedge fund — might acquire their publications that they began a public campaign searching for alternative buyers. Alden has a record of making steep staffing cuts and selling off newspapers' real estate assets to wring out profits. One study found that between 2012 and 2020, Alden cut staff by more than 75% at NewsGuild-represented papers after taking over.

Many journalists at Gannett papers have also joined the union wave, prompted by years of layoffs as well as fears that the GateHouse acquisition of Gannett would mean even more downsizing. Over the past few years, more than 15 Gannett papers have unionized, including The Arizona Republic, the Austin American-Statesman, and The Palm Beach Post. Tribune Publishing's Hartford Courant unionized in 2019, and last April, the Daily News, once the nation's highest-circulation paper, voted 55 to 3 to unionize. Last June, 140 journalists at 11 Southern California newspapers, including The Orange County Register and the Los Angeles Daily News, voted to unionize.

Daniela Altimari, the Hartford Courant's state house reporter, talks of devastation at her paper, where what was once a nearly 400-person newsroom has dwindled to having less than 30 reporters and one photographer today. "We saw things were getting bad," she says, adding that things started a long slide after Tribune Publishing acquired the paper in 2000. "We had no idea how bad they'd get." The Courant's journalists finally decided to unionize in 2019.

More recently, the pandemic has also spurred unionization. With so many journalists working from home, isolated from each other, "there has been a greater desire to have a voice and a greater desire to have a community," says Lowell Peterson, executive director of the Writers Guild of America, East. Other pandemic-related factors have similarly pushed journalists toward unions. "People want to have a voice in the protocols: testing, masking, vaxxing," Peterson adds, noting that more journalists "want to push for the right to work at home," not just for safety reasons, but also for work-life balance.

Concern about Covid-19 was one of the issues that led Stephanie Brumsey, a producer at MSNBC, and many of her co-workers to push to unionize with the Writers Guild. They were eager to have a voice on "whether we have to go back to the office," she says, noting that management was pushing harder for a return to the office than many workers were comfortable with. "We definitely felt part of the unionization wave," Brumsey says, adding that better pay and benefits were also a factor. "We looked at the company we love, and we wondered how we could make it better. We wanted to have more say." In August, MSNBC's workers voted 141 to 58 in favor of unionizing.

The thousands of newly unionized journalists have made some important gains. HuffPost's current contract sets a $59,238 minimum for reporters starting in February, while The New Yorker's contract sets a $60,000 minimum as of 2023 for the magazine's employees. The NewsGuild said some employees had been making $42,000. In December, Vice Media's union announced a contract that sets a $63,000 minimum pay by the end of 2024. Union contracts for journalists have also prohibited non-disclosure agreements that hide cases in which managers are accused of sexual harassment or discrimination. Many newsroom contracts now have diversity provisions, often similar to the one that The New Yorker agreed to: that at least half of the job candidates interviewed for open positions will come from underrepresented groups. And, in an industry with so much turmoil, union negotiators are frequently insisting on successorship clauses and improved severance pay. The Intercept's successor clause, for example, says the union contract shall remain effective in the event the company is sold.

Back at The Record, workers were fuming when management said it wanted to phase out company-issued cell phones and pay a maximum of $50 a month toward phone bills. The newly formed union helped beat back that proposal. "We deserve a seat at the table for negotiating these things," says Katie Sobko, a Record reporter for 11 years. "That has become increasingly necessary to ensure that we preserve and protect ourselves, our careers, and local journalism, as well."

Low salaries were also a pivotal factor in unionizing, according to Sobko, adding that some Record reporters earn just $35,000 a year. "We live in one of the most expensive real estate markets in the world [North Jersey]," she says. "We don't earn a living wage."

Ever since The Record's workers unionized, Gannett hasn't laid off anyone at the paper, according to the president of The Record's union. "I think that's indicative of the power of the union," says Kelly, the columnist. (Thomas C. Zipfel, Gannett's labor relations counsel, has said, "We respect the right of employees ... to make a fully informed choice for themselves whether to unionize or not to unionize.")

Twenty-nine months after unionizing, employees at Wirecutter, a product-recommendation website owned by The New York Times Company, got their first contract, a 26-month deal that included immediate pay increases averaging around $5,000, as well as roughly 3% raises for each year of the contract. Salaries for the lowest-paid Wirecutter staff members would immediately increase 18%, according to union officials.

The two sides reached an agreement in December, not long after all 65 members of the Wirecutter union went on strike from Black Friday through Cyber Monday — peak holiday shopping days — and urged consumers to boycott the site. The idea was to hurt The Times' bottom line because when shoppers click from the Wirecutter website through to, say, Best Buy or Amazon, the Times Company often gets a percentage of the purchase price.

Many workers at Wirecutter were dismayed that it took more than two years to reach an agreement. The union asserted that The Times had intentionally dragged out negotiations (something The Times denied) as a way to discourage a unionization effort by roughly 600 of The Times' tech workers. But Wirecutter isn't the only newsroom to experience a long delay. At several outlets, workers who unionized two or more years ago still haven't reached a first contract with their employer. That's the case at BuzzFeed News, the Chicago Tribune, the Hartford Courant, The Arizona Republic, and NBC News.

Union leaders argue that many companies deliberately drag their feet in bargaining to sour workers on their unions. At BuzzFeed, which unionized in July 2019, employees say company officials may have delayed reaching a contract and offering substantial raises so as not to harm BuzzFeed's initial public offering on Dec. 6. The week before, 61 Buzzfeed workers walked out for a day.

"I think that is a management tactic not only at BuzzFeed, but when I talk to chairs at other unions they say their companies are slow-walking this process," says Addy Baird, a political reporter at BuzzFeed News and chair of its NewsGuild unit. "It's really exhausting ... It can be demoralizing."

With inflation running at over 6%, Baird criticized BuzzFeed's offer of a 1% across-the-board raise. "I think it's insulting," she says. "I know our members think the same way." A BuzzFeed spokesman tells Nieman Reports that the company offered merit raises in addition to the 1% guaranteed increase. Meanwhile, the two sides have reached tentative agreement on more than a dozen isssues, including remote work and grievance procedures.

News employees, like workers in many other industries, often face opposition from their companies when they seek to form a union and bargain collectively. At The New York Times, many of the 600 tech workers have been trying to win union recognition since last April. If they are successful, the Times Tech Guild would be the nation's biggest union of tech workers with collective bargaining rights. Times management is insisting on a unionization vote, refusing to recognize the union even though the NewsGuild says more than 70% of The Times' tech workers have signed pro-union cards. (Under federal law, employers are required to grant union recognition if a majority of workers vote to unionize, but they don't have to grant recognition based on the signing of pro-union cards.)

The Times rejected the request for voluntary recognition because "we've heard a significant amount of reservations and uncertainty among our technology and digital teams about what a union would mean for them," says Danielle Rhoades Ha, The Times' vice president for corporate communications. She adds: "We have a long history of productive relationships with our various unions." The National Labor Relations Board said on Jan. 12 that it would mail ballots to The Times' technical workers so they could vote on unionizing.

"WE DESERVE A SEAT AT THE TABLE FOR NEGOTIATING THESE THINGS. THAT HAS BECOME INCREASINGLY NECESSARY TO ENSURE THAT WE ... PROTECT OURSELVES"

KATIE SOBKO, REPORTER AT THE RECORD

Nozlee Samadzadeh, a senior software engineer, said she was dismayed by The Times' response to the unionizing efforts, which included urging workers to attend anti-union information sessions and what she called its "divide-and-conquer strategy." The Times has proposed letting only software engineers join the Times Tech Guild, while leaving out more than 200 other workers, including product designers and project managers — though the NLRB rejected the attempt to split the group. "The message we get, particularly from Meredith [Kopit Levien, The Times' President and CEO] is this patronizing one: 'We don't need a union. We're all friends. We can figure it out,'" Samadzadeh says. "Which is pretty disrespectful in its own way."

With 8.4 million subscribers, The Times is one of the financially stronger news organizations, in theory more able to give solid raises. But Emily Bell, director of the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia Journalism School, says unions would be misguided to treat all news organization as deep-pocketed. "We're looking at a bifurcated industry," she says. "You have the bigger, richer organizations making money, and quite a bit of it, and you have local outlets still really struggling."

Bell says the unionization wave shouldn't be a surprise. When many digital media companies were having a hard time hitting their financial targets, "the one way to get there was to squeeze staff," she says. "The inevitable response to that was to unionize."

But increased pay for journalists might hasten the demise of some news organizations. Bell says the upshot is: "You have prestige newsrooms making unionization a core part of their workplace. This perhaps builds a smaller, but more equitable industry." ■

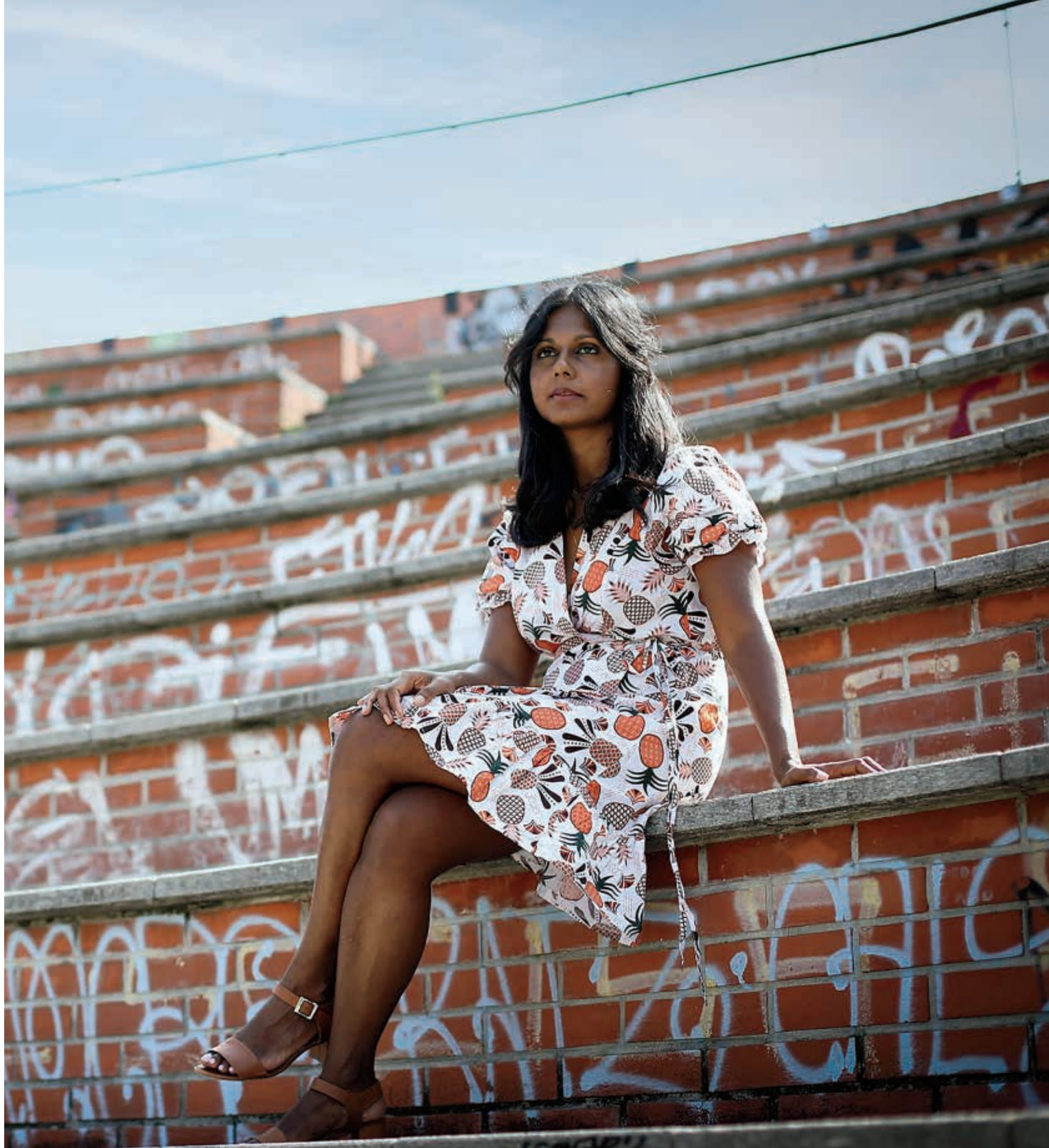
TACKLING RACISM IN EUROPE

Podcasters of color make their own space for conversations on race to fill the void left by mainstream media

BY STEFANIA D'IGNOTI

IN THE EARLY SUMMER OF 2020, the Black Lives Matter protests unleashed after a Minneapolis police officer murdered George Floyd reached Europe, too.

During the protests, people filled the streets and squares across European cities to denounce systemic racism, chanting the popular Black Lives Matter refrain and holding signs that read "We can't breathe either," and "This is not an American thing," as they defaced statues of the continent's slave traders and colonizers of Africa and the Americas.



PREVIOUS PAGE: Nadeesha Uyangoda, a Milan-based writer, started the podcast Sulla Razza (About Race) in an effort to create a more robust vocabulary around race for Italian audiences

RIGHT: Kiffe Ta Race co-hosts Rokhaya Diallo (left) and Grace Ly challenge the idea that France is a "color-blind" nation

These protestors were not only calling out Europe's colonial past — the centuries of subjugating non-white people in distant lands and extracting their resources. They were also taking aim at the racial tensions that have long simmered across the continent as decades of migration from those former colonies have been met by xenophobia and the rise of right-wing, nationalist political parties. About a third of African descendants recently polled by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights said they had been subjected to racial harassment, while 5% said they had been physically attacked. Earlier this year in Germany, politicians of Turkish and Syrian descent saw their campaign posters defaced with racist slurs and received death threats. In March, the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights released a report noting that Portugal has seen a rise in hate crimes and speech targeting people of African descent. The racist abuse aimed at English soccer players following the team's defeat in the Euro 2020 finals this past July is another example of how racial justice remains elusive in Europe.

Despite efforts to integrate minorities and their descendants within what has historically been mainly-white societies, racism has often been defined as a uniquely American problem. The lack of diversity in many European newsrooms exacerbates this problem, though some, particularly in the U.K., have started to realize the need to diversify their staff. Realizing its own lack of diversity, the BBC committed to creating a staff that's at least 20% people of color, and other outlets across Europe have tried — at least on paper — to set similar targets. In 2019, Dutch journalist Hadjar Benmiloud opened Vileine Academy, a training program designed to give women of color the skills they need to compete for investigative journalism jobs. That same year, Deutsche Welle, the publicly-funded German international broadcasting outlet, created a diversity management position. In October, the Guardian hired its first senior executive for diversity and development.

Within this ecosystem, podcasts have been popping up to fill the void of coverage of racism and race — and in some cases, starting the conversation around how to find the right words to discuss fraught topics in different languages. This piece will explore these themes through podcasts produced in Italy, Germany, and France.

ITALY

A COUPLE OF MONTHS BEFORE the BLM protests erupted across Europe, Ariam Tekle, a 33-year-old Italian Eritrean anthropologist and documentary filmmaker, had launched her Black Coffee podcast on Black identities in Italy and was struggling to attract an audience. Suddenly, as people filled the streets demanding social justice, her listenership more than doubled, going from less than 1,000 to more than 2,000 listeners per episode, according to Tekle.

"People felt the need to educate themselves about topics that weren't new to us but were to them," says Tekle, whose parents immigrated to Italy from Eritrea in the 1970s. "With a mainstream media gap about racial debates in Italy, podcasts have become the go-to place for those looking for answers."

The discussions Tekle and other podcasters have begun are wrapped up in Europe's long history of colonialism and more recent influx of migrants. Between the 1960s and 70s, countries like France and Italy saw a wave of immigration from former African colonies, while Germany and the Netherlands, which had fewer colonies in Africa, saw an uptick in Turkish laborers attracted by the job opportunities.

Because of the lower barrier to entry, podcasts have become an important medium — especially for content creators outside the realm of traditional journalism — to connect with listeners on issues of race. Throughout the continent, podcast consumption in recent years has increased dramatically, particularly in countries like Spain, Italy, and France. According to 2018 data, in just a one week period, an average of almost 28% of adults in Europe listened to podcasts.

"The fact that the majority of race podcasts creators in Europe are not journalists is a strength, because what people want to hear now are those who often don't have a voice," says Rhoda Tchokokam, a member of the Black French artists collective Piment, which ran a live radio show about Black identities in France from 2017 to 2020. "And these platforms are the only resource to achieve that."

In 2019, Tekle met Emmanuelle Maréchal, a French Cameroonian who had spent time in Italy as a student. Before meeting in person, the pair had been corresponding for some time about the challenges of growing up Black in their respective countries. It's thanks to those discussions that they realized the importance of sharing their perspective with a larger audience and decided to co-found and co-host Black Coffee, through which they regularly entertain their audience for 30 minutes to over an hour. "The Italian mainstream media landscape is widely dominated by white people, so launching our own independent podcast was often the sole platform to share these conversations, to make them public," Tekle says.

Although there are no official statistics on Italy's newsroom diversity, a 2019 report by Associazione Carta di Roma, a journalism group monitoring immigration coverage in Italy, found that as few as 7% of journalists had an immigrant background.

According to Tekle, this has contributed to coverage that depicts the BLM movement as a U.S. phenomenon that doesn't apply to Italy. The lack of media diversity and how it affects coverage of minorities is among the main topics discussed on Black Coffee. In April, for example, Tekle and Maréchal devoted an episode to Italian state TV Rai Italia and what they said was its complicity in portraying minorities in racist and stereotypical ways.

In the episode, the two hosts addressed efforts within Italian TV to play down oft-used racist tropes targeting the appearance of minorities and the language barriers they face. The pair also tackled the recent use of blackface on Rai Italia and references to slanted eyes during shows on Mediaset, a commercial channel. The pair offered constructive suggestions, advocating for including minorities in the mainstream media dialogue. Their hope is that adding those voices will help educate more people about the struggles people of color face in Italy.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: MARIA MORATTI/GETTY IMAGES

None of Rai Italia's spokespeople responded to Black Coffee's episode, nor did they comment on a subsequent campaign by activists to change its racist policies. However, in May, the organization apologized for the use of blackface in its shows and urged editors to not air shows with it, but did not ban the practice outright. Meanwhile, the conversation about the portrayal of minorities on Italian TV was reignited in September when two presenters from Mediaset won an innovation award despite being heavily criticized for the use of the n-word on their prime-time program.

Podcasts like Black Coffee fill an important gap in conversations about race. For now, however, most rely on independent platforms for distribution so they can maintain their editorial independence from mainstream outlets — many of which haven't sufficiently grappled with the racial and ethnic disparities in Italy. Tekle and Maréchal crowdfunded Black Coffee, which is available on Apple Podcasts.

More podcasts tackling issues of race in Italy have sprouted recently. Author and journalist Nadeesha Uyangoda created Sulla Razza (About Race) in April 2020 with two co-hosts. Their aim is to explain Anglo-American terms like "tokenism," "the n-word," and "BIPOC" and discuss their relevance to life in Italy.

Through this project, Uyangoda is addressing another issue in Italy that is often overlooked by the mainstream media: the lack of a shared vocabulary to talk about race. Terms like "white privilege" or "colorism," for example, don't have a translation in Italian. "All the podcasts I listened to were in English," says Uyangoda. "I wanted to create something in Italian about race, but I noticed the language gap to explain certain topics was often impeding that — because in the Italian language many of these concepts simply do not exist."

Take the word Black itself, which in Italy is used as a kind of umbrella concept, Uyangoda says. "I'm a brown South Asian, but there's no term for brown people in Italian. So far these language gaps, which often don't convey just how multifaceted racism is, haven't been filled by mainstream media," she adds.

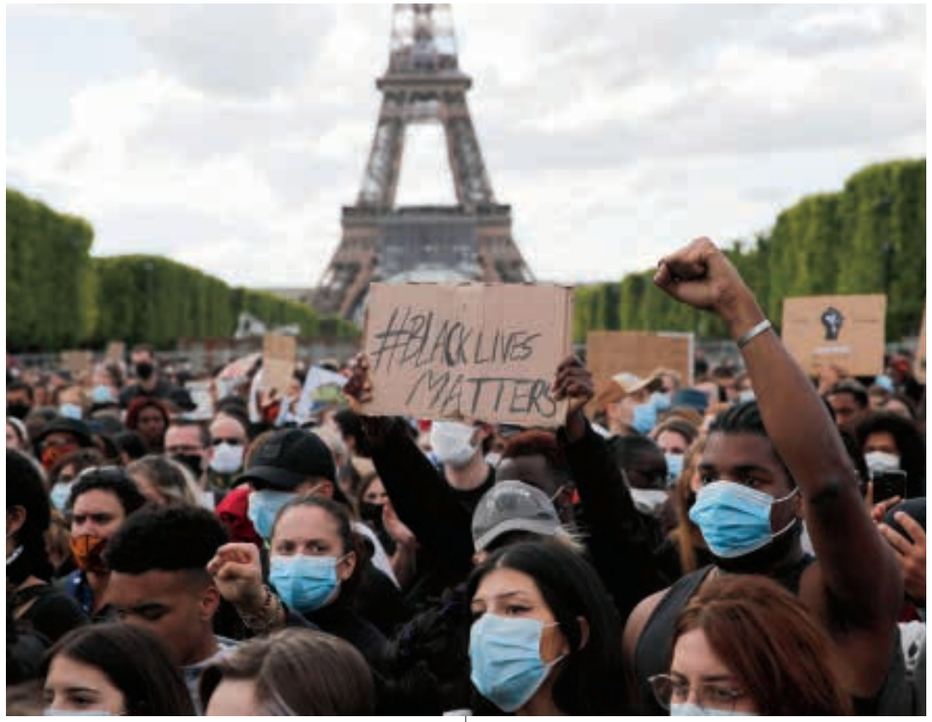
Twice a month, Uyangoda and her team dissect a new word during the half-hour episode and find alternative, creative ways to translate and adapt them to the Italian context. In their sixth episode, for instance, they introduced their audience to the American expression "model minority," normally used to refer to Asians and how they are often depicted in media as the good, "deserving" immigrant.

ABOVE: COURTESY OF DJIBY KEBE; RIGHT: COURTESY OF ADJI DIEYE

"WITH A MAINSTREAM MEDIA GAP ABOUT RACIAL DEBATES IN ITALY, PODCASTS HAVE BECOME THE GO-TO PLACE FOR THOSE LOOKING FOR ANSWERS"

ARIAM TEKLE

Throughout the episode, Uyangoda explains how common stereotypes about Asian children in Italian schools — from being good at math but speaking broken Italian — impact their lives as adults. She analyzes how the concepts of "deserving migrant" and "deserving poor" also exist in Italy. "We take [on] the Italian citizenship law example, that needs to be 'deserved' rather



Demonstrators gather on the Champs de Mars in Paris, France, to protest the murder of George Floyd. The outrcry prompted more discussions around race in Europe

FRANCOIS MORI/AP PHOTO

than acquired by being born on Italian soil or culturally after decades of residence," explains Uyangoda, who, despite living in Italy for 22 years since the age of six, still doesn't qualify for Italian citizenship.

"Even in Italy there's this idea that some ethnicities are better off and more deserving of acceptance compared to others," she adds. In the episode, the hosts also tackle the issue of poverty as a cultural phenomenon, where migrants — often from Africa — can be limited to a life of fewer opportunities because of their skin color.

GERMANY

IN GERMANY, podcasts tackling race issues have been around longer than in Italy, but they also experienced an uptick in interest following the BLM protests. Although Germany had a much smaller role than some other European powers in the colonization of Africa, its violent history can't be erased. In May, the country formally recognized the genocide it committed in the country now known as Namibia in the early 20th century, during which about 75,000 people were killed. The move gave many hope that the protests of the prior year were ushering in concrete change.

In 2016, Alice Hasters, a German-American Black author, and a friend launched Feuer & Brot (Fire & Bread) as a way to bring gender and racial issues into the national conversation in Germany. Since the BLM protests in Europe, its number of listeners has almost doubled.

"At that time, the podcast landscape in Germany was mainly dominated by white men, so we wanted to bring in a different perspective about topics that weren't widely tackled in mainstream media, but people had an interest in," Hasters says. "We chose to speak about something that directly interested us, too, and the two main themes that came up were feminism and racism. We said, 'Why not explore how these two intersect?'"

During each episode, Hasters and co-host Maximiliane Häcke discuss topics like relationship break-ups or what it's like to watch a movie at the theater as a person of color — a perspective to which white audiences are not generally exposed. In the episode "Magical Negro," Hasters and Häcke analyze the stereotype of the friendly, mysterious Black person who magically appears out of nowhere and makes it his mission to help the white main character.

"We call this 'romanticized oppression,' and we try to help our audience see how, despite their talent, Black people are usually relegated to secondary roles," Hasters explains. "We dissect the plots of popular movies such as 'The Green Mile' or 'Ghost' where literally through magical abilities — which sometimes they don't want to have at all — or through a talent they do not use for themselves, but only to teach others, cinema seems to force the idea that Black people are only there to help white people."

During the podcast, the pair argues that the film industry has not made as much progress as it claims in including non-white actors through color-blind casting and creating roles specifically for minorities.

The BLM protests in Germany had an impact on the local media landscape, according to Hasters. She's noticed more independent podcasts mainly aimed at younger audiences are sprouting up to tackle these issues.

Her own work began receiving more recognition. She was invited last year to host the current events podcast of Die Zeit, a national legacy newspaper in Hamburg. "The fact that these are gaining more popularity raises hopes that there will be an interest in getting race talks into mainstream media," she says.

FRANCE

IN FRANCE, despite a historically more multicultural society than that of Italy or Germany, the discussion of race and racism remains contentious. The country has a deep-rooted self-perception that it is a color-blind society. Attempts to speak about race and ethnic identity have been hindered by a culture that promotes the idea that French identity supersedes any other background or ethnicity.

But that doesn't mean racism does not exist in the country. In fact, last year's protests following the killing of George Floyd resonated across France more than elsewhere in Europe, because of the country's history of slavery and institutional racism. This is particularly true as it relates to police brutality against citizens with Black or Arab backgrounds in the banlieues, the suburbs around Paris and other large French cities where many immigrants and first- and second-generation French citizens live.

Grace Ly, co-host of the podcast Kiffe ta Race (Love Your Race) — one of France's most popular podcasts on race — says France's idea of itself as a color-blind society needs to be challenged. "The French have this arrogant way of not seeing race," Ly says. "They argue that there's no difference of race; we're all just French citizens of one, indivisible republican community. So, when protests last year erupted in France, too, they were simply labeled as a U.S.-imported concept that doesn't apply to the French or European scenario."

Ly argues that minorities in France are still invisible in the public space, especially in the media. The collection and computerized storage of race-based statistics is illegal (without individual consent or state waiver) under a 1978 French law, which makes it hard to quantify the lack of media diversity. But 2018 data from the French National Institute for Demographic Studies show that immigrants make up 9.7% of the total French population. That's more than six million people — about 37% of whom are French citizens.

Through the work of Kiffe ta Race, Ly has tried to dismantle the idea that racism is not intrinsic to French society.

Every other week, Ly and her co-host, Rokhaya Diallo, a French journalist of West African descent, welcome guests to explore racial issues in everyday life. In a recent episode, they hosted Michaëla Danjé, a musician and activist who spoke about the extra challenges Black people face when transitioning gender. Their program also aims to discuss topics otherwise absent from public discourse, such as the extra burden placed on minorities seeking mental health assistance.

In another episode, the pair dissects the psychological impact systemic racism has on minorities. Throughout the talk with guest Fatma Bouvet de la Maisonneuve, an author and psychiatrist who works with patients facing prejudice in their everyday lives, they discuss the emotional toll of racism that often is not publicly recognized.

This "invisible pain" often goes beyond physical, verbal, or institutional discrimination, because it entails a whole range of micro-aggressions that weigh on non-white people. Bouvet de la Maisonneuve explains that minorities, more than white people, have to adjust their behaviors to meet social expectations and disprove harmful stereotypes. "We wanted to address these issues from a personal perspective and needed a common space to talk and find solutions," Ly says.

Getting to that common space was not easy. Ly and Diallo's initial pitch was for a TV program on one of the major French broadcast channels. That pitch was rejected multiple times. In some instances, they were asked to soften the proposed topics and change the title, which was considered by some to be too racist. "You cannot use the words 'your race' because there's only one human race," Ly remembers one producer telling her at the time.

PODCASTS HAVE BECOME AN IMPORTANT MEDIUM FOR CONTENT CREATORS OUTSIDE OF JOURNALISM TO CONNECT WITH LISTENERS ON ISSUES OF RACE

Podcasting seemed like the only platform that would allow them the editorial independence they sought. Produced by Binge Audio, one of France's main podcast platforms, Kiffe ta Race officially launched in 2018; today, it's in its third season with about 160,000 listeners per episode.

Ly thinks this interest came as a result of the combination of the rise of nationalism in Europe as well as the killing of George Floyd in the U.S., which reminded them of their own episodes of police brutality. In July 2016, Adama Traoré, a 24-year-old man of Malian origin, died while in police custody in a Paris banlieue. His death was officially ruled the result of heart failure, but an independent autopsy done at the request of Traoré's family says he was asphyxiated similar to Floyd. The protests in the summer of 2020 became an opportunity for France to confront its own episodes of racial violence and gave Kiffe ta Race fresh relevance.

"It's thanks to podcasts that these conversations are becoming more accessible and are slowly changing the perspective of French people on local episodes of racism and police brutality, showing there could be a chance one day to bring them to mainstream media [and] proving that there's an interest from listeners," Ly says. ■

STANDING GUARD IN INDIA

The last few bastions of the free press are holding the Modi government to account

BY VIDYA KRISHNAN

UNCTIONING DEMOCRACIES are all alike; every dysfunctional democracy is dysfunctional in its own way.

India, where the free press has played a crucial role in protecting democratic institutions since independence in 1947, is now one of the world's most dangerous countries for journalists. Hindu nationalist Prime Minister Narendra Modi has launched an unparalleled assault on truth, with the free press cast as the enemy of the state.

The response to the death of Indian photojournalist Danish Siddiqui is a case in point.

On July 16, 2021, Siddiqui was killed by Taliban terrorists in Kandahar, Afghanistan. He was covering the clash between Afghan special forces and Taliban fighters for Reuters. At 38, he had already won a Pulitzer Prize for Feature Photography for documenting Myanmar's Rohingya refugee crisis. His colleagues described him as "a man who cared deeply about the stories he covered." Condolences poured in from around the world, with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, the U.S. State Department, and United Nations secretary general António Guterres expressing grief at the tragic news.

Modi chose not to acknowledge Siddiqui's death. Meanwhile, the prime minister's followers called Siddiqui — an Indian Muslim murdered by the Taliban — a "jihadi."

Indian journalists are painfully aware of the elemental rage directed at them by the government as well as by audiences. Many journalists, including myself, spent most of July 16-17 receiving death threats with warnings of a "similar fate" awaiting us.

India's media universe is vast, with over 17,000 newspapers, 100,000 magazines, 178 television news channels, and countless websites in dozens of languages. Under Modi, this vast mediascape has been exposed to every kind of attack — editors are threatened, advertising cut off, tax investigations launched, police violence perpetrated against reporters, ambushes by the ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s political supporters, and reprisals from corrupt local officials. The coordinated hate campaigns, launched by BJP's troll armies, are foundational to the systematic assault on truth in India. Discrediting and harassing journalists, especially women, is central to how the Modi government operates, with severe paranoia and vindictive cruelty.

Over the past seven years, India's legacy media organizations have caved under pressure, and low-resource newsrooms with small, multitasking teams — like The Caravan, Scroll, and The Wire — have found themselves in the trenches, holding the government to account, especially now during the pandemic.

As of Jan. 13 the official tally for cases and deaths in India stood at 36.3 million and 485,000, respectively. Yet, researchers around the world have challenged these numbers. By conservative estimates, 495 million Indians had contracted Covid-19 by mid May of 2021. According to a study released by the Center for Global Development, around four million Indians have died since the pandemic began. Videos of families — and hospitals — scrambling for oxygen have become enduring testaments to the mismanagement of this pandemic. Modi, his government, his party, his supporters, and their science denialism bear direct liability for the carnage brought on by the virus.

Independent local and regional newsrooms, together with families of the dead, have come together to document deaths during the deadly second Covid-19 wave, which the Modi administration has under-reported by a factor of ten, according to the study.

The changing political mood has meant that audiences have started to invest in local, independent newsrooms.

"It is almost entirely due to the support of our readers and views that The Wire has managed to sustain itself financially," says Siddharth Varadarajan, founding editor of The Wire, which faces several lawsuits that allege the outlet has disseminated fake news, disobeyed an order from a public servant, and made statements designed to cause fear or alarm.

"Over the past 18 months, reader donations have been buoyant, and this is largely due to their understanding that our journalism has made a difference in these difficult times and needs to be supported."

Vinod Jose, executive editor of The Caravan, has seen a similar bump in support. "The anger directed against Caravan's reporting is directly proportionate to the growth in subscription we have been witnessing," he says. "Watchdog journalism helped The New York Times, The Washington Post, and others grow the base of subscribers during the Trump presidency; we are seeing a similar pattern, at a smaller rate." In the past few years, The Caravan's subscription has grown, both domestically and internationally.

"We started The Wire with the understanding that readers would be willing to pay for quality, independent journalism," Varadarajan says. "Our experience has validated that belief. Nor are we the only ones. I think people see a connection between how media is funded and how independent and gutsy it can be."

Smaller newsrooms — now staffed with reporters elbowed out of legacy media organizations — have been unflinching as they document the humanitarian crisis unfolding in India's hospitals, prisons, schools, and courtrooms. However, freelancers are struggling. "Most freelancers in India also don't have a press card and that makes it difficult to report in a crisis like the pandemic," says Neha Dixit, who in 2016 reported that members of a right-wing nationalist group had trafficked 31 girls in Assam state. The story was published in Outlook magazine, which now faces a criminal defamation suit for "inciting communal hatred through writing." She could face a five-year prison term. "There is no legal support for the cases filed against me," Dixit adds. "This is my fifth year of fighting cases filed against me because of my reportage, and [I'm] bearing the legal costs myself."

The pandemic has torpedoed through a generation of journalists, resulting in the death of Rajkumar Keswani, for example, who issued warnings about irregularities at the Union Carbide factory for several years before the Bhopal gas disaster in 1984. During the darkest months of India's devastating second wave, between March and May of 2021, Covid-19 was killing three journalists a day. The death toll — 622 as of Oct. 5 — places India among the world's worst in terms of Covid-related deaths of journalists. We will carry for the rest of our lives the trauma of watching one of our colleagues, Vinay Srivastava, a journalist in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, live tweet his death, with real-time updates on his declining oxygen.

PREVIOUS SPREAD:
Multiple funeral pyres for Covid-19 victims burn at a site converted into a mass crematorium in New Delhi

LEFT:
Journalists light candles and pay tribute to Reuters photographer Danish Siddiqui in New Delhi. Siddiqui was killed as he chronicled fighting between Afghan forces and the Taliban

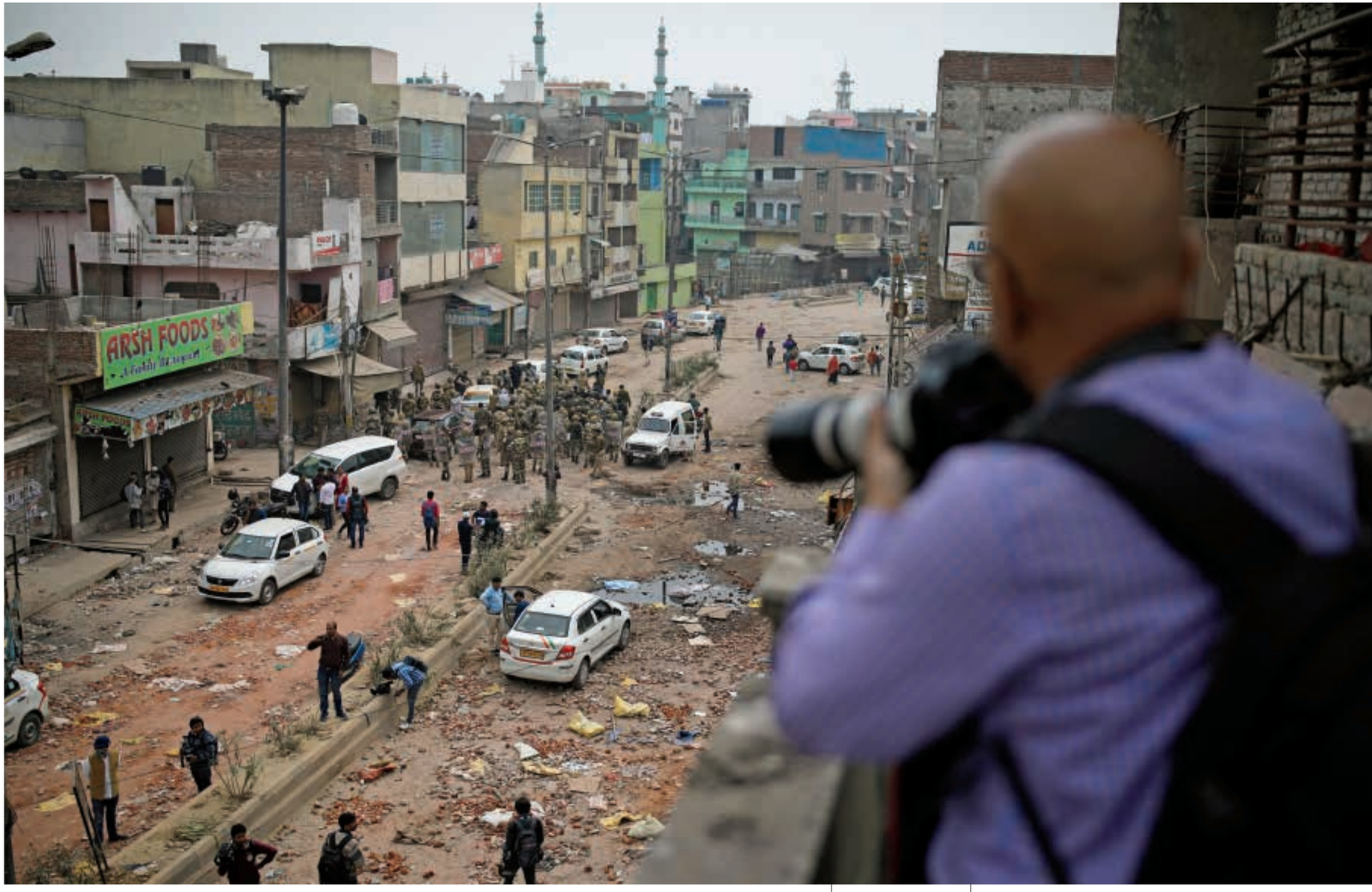
LEFT: ALTAF QADRI/AP PHOTO; PREVIOUS SPREAD: ALTAF QADRI/AP PHOTO

DURING THE DARKEST MONTHS OF INDIA'S DEVASTATING SECOND WAVE, BETWEEN MARCH AND MAY OF 2021, COVID-19 WAS KILLING THREE JOURNALISTS A DAY

Parallel to the destruction brought on by the pandemic, the Modi administration has tightened its chokehold on the media. "Criminal prosecutions are meanwhile often used to gag journalists critical of the authorities," notes the latest update on press freedom by Reporters Without Borders. "In 2020, the government took advantage of the coronavirus crisis to step up its control of news coverage by prosecuting journalists providing information at variance with the official position. The situation is still very worrying in Kashmir, where reporters are often harassed by police and paramilitaries and must cope with utterly Orwellian content regulations, and where media outlets are liable to be closed, as was the case with the valley's leading daily, the Kashmir Times."

The fears journalists had — of being spied on, targeted systematically by extrajudicial measures — were confirmed following a series of reports by the Pegasus Project, an international investigative series that revealed governments' espionage on journalists, opposition politicians, activists, business people, and others using the private spyware developed by the Israeli technology and cyberarms firm NSO Group. Journalists, particularly those based in Delhi, were primary targets of surveillance. In all, over 40 journalists, two ministers, a Supreme Court judge, and three opposition leaders' names have emerged as targets. Following these revelations, Modi's government stands accused of treason and "unforgivable sacrilege" by Rahul Gandhi, India's most prominent political opposition figure, who was also targeted by NSO Group's surveillance software, according to the Pegasus reporting.

Modi has never been more unpopular than he is right now, as evidenced by his party's loss in recent elections in West Bengal, India's fourth-most populous state. India Today's latest Mood of the Nation Survey found that Modi's popularity had dipped from a low 38% in January to an even lower 24% in August.



A photojournalist observes Indian paramilitary soldiers patrolling a vandalized street in February 2020. In the past year, reporting has become a riskier task for journalists in India

ALTAF QADRI/AP PHOTO

Troll farms, on- and offline, try to fight this political swing and in the process have brought India to the edge of a post-truth abyss where facts matter less and emotions — and political affiliations — matter more in shaping the discourse.

A 2018 report on state-sponsored trolling noted that the BJP IT cell, a mix of volunteer and paid amateur trolls, is similar to China's "50 Cent Army" — people paid nominal sums to spread nationalistic propaganda — and tasked with targeting "a hit list" of mainstream journalists.

Reporting the changing mood of Indian voters who have suffered economic, humanitarian, and deeply personal tragedies under Modi's leadership seems to be journalism's primary crime.

But India has changed. Our families, communities, and cities are devastated. Journalists are dead, and those who haven't died continue to report on the devastation.

In Modi's India, if Danish Siddiqui is a "jihadi," then I am one, too. If our readers cannot tell the difference between hacks who have sold their reputations and ones who are taking bullets from terrorists in the line of duty, they lose their right to comment on the state of media.

Audiences will decide the winner in the fight between the last few bastions of the free press and an increasingly authoritarian Modi administration.

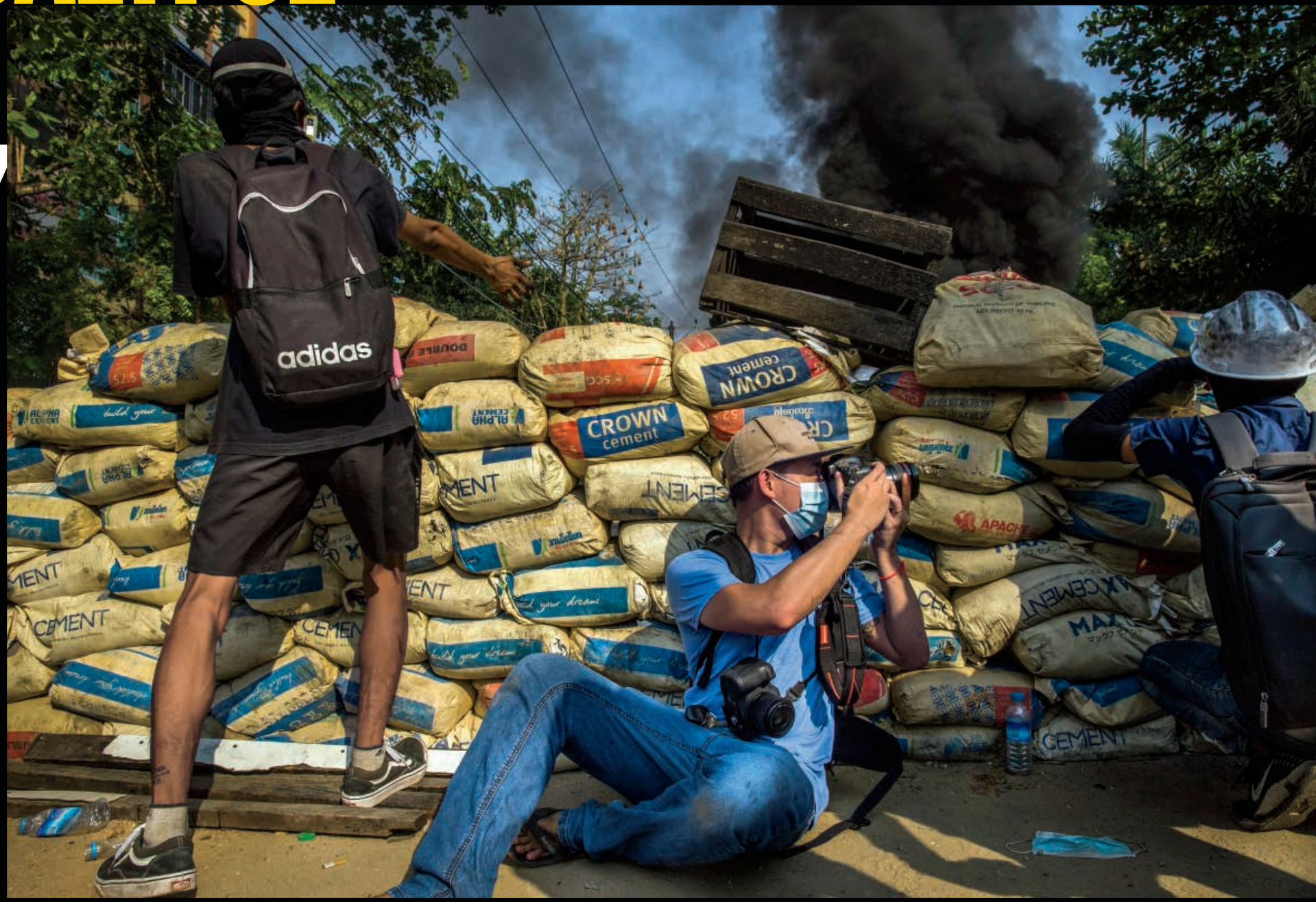
The denial of facts, of changing realities of India, is the audience's gravest offence against itself; it maximizes hatred and minimizes reason. A moral stand by readers — like those who have stepped up to support the independent reporting of outlets like The Wire and The Caravan — is the only defense against the Modi administration's regulatory capture of India's democratic institutions.

There is no other stand. ■

“AN APOCALYPSE FOR THE MEDIA”

FORMER ‘OUTLAW’ JOURNALISTS LEAD THE BATTLE FOR A FREE PRESS IN MYANMAR

BY JARED DOWNING



ABOVE: AUNG KYAW HTET/SOPA IMAGES VIA GETTY

Protesters make a three finger salute during a demonstration against the military coup. People have been wary even to stand near journalists for fear of government reprisals

When soldiers finally swarmed the offices of Mizzima Media in March, the building was empty. Its editors had already taken the computers, cameras, microphones, and notes and vanished into different corners of Myanmar. It had taken weeks for the new junta to blacklist them, but the staff had begun packing on day one.

"We were, in our minds, always thinking, 'One day the military will come back,'" says editor-in-chief and managing director Soe Myint.

Soe Myint had seen it all some 30 years before, when decades of resentment against Myanmar's socialist dictatorship finally ignited on Aug. 8, 1988. The 8888 Uprising, as the widespread, pro-democracy protests came to be known, led to the collapse of the government, but in its place rose a military surveillance state that kept democracy champion Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest and brutally snuffed out any dissent. Dodging the censorship board and an omnipresent police spy network, journalists smuggled drafts out of the country in the soles of their shoes and used contraband satellite phones to deliver news to the wider world.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: A news photographer covers a battle protest in Yangon. Many journalists have gone into hiding since the military reclaimed power last February

An election was held in 2010, and for a brief time it seemed Myanmar had finally achieved democracy. But in February 2021, the military reclaimed power. Police rounded up journalists by the dozens and forced them to sign agreements not to cover the protests, and the new junta revoked the licenses of five major outlets. A few simply closed, but others continued to publish underground.

"Exile is in our DNA," says Soe Myint, who is currently in hiding. "The military wanted to destroy us, wanted to kill us. We are still alive. Alive and better than ever."

And yet, while the old regime stifled the free press swiftly and decisively, Myanmar has a new generation of journalists and independent publications, and the new junta seems uncertain about what to do with them. It banned some media outlets yet left others alone, seemingly at random. It has arrested four foreign journalists (two of whom have since been released) so far, but most international outlets haven't been publicly denounced. It shut down cellular data but fiber connections, though restricted, remain open, allowing citizen reporters to circulate information and photos online. It outlawed the words "junta," "regime," and "coup," but a military spokesperson quipped — on the record — that if they enforced that rule there would be no media left.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: NEW YORK TIMES VIA REDUX

"Honestly, I have no idea what will happen," says freelance journalist Mratt Kyaw Thu. "It's like an apocalypse for the media."

Mratt, who became a reporter in 2010, was among those charged with "spreading news to affect State stability."

"I wrote about what would happen if communications staff joined CDM," he explains, referencing the nationwide Civil Disobedience Movement. "I spoke about how the whole broadcast [system] would collapse." At the time of the interview, Mratt was sheltering with an ethnic nationalist militia, but he has since escaped to Spain, where he is seeking asylum. His Facebook page, Mratt's Channel, has become a kind of grassroots news network of its own. Mratt's network of colleagues and amateur stringers do phone interviews using burner SIM cards and then find a working fiber connection to send their notes, using a VPN and an encrypted messenger like Signal or WhatsApp. The system works, but it's unreliable and makes even simple fact-checking a grind.

Worse, people are reluctant to speak with journalists — or even stand near one on the street — as they are terrified of being arrested in the night after some reporter posts their photo to Facebook or Twitter. "If you post something online or do a live stream on Facebook, people will say you're giving information to the military," Mratt says. "So, you have to take pictures and ask questions very secretly."

One major publication, which has gone underground, published a photo of members of a newly formed resistance group. Their faces were blurred, but police were able to identify the hotel in the background. Troops raided it the next day. On social media, the publication was branded an "informer" — a new slur for spies and journalists alike. "It's the same as in the '90s, except in the '90s, not even one person dared to talk to us," says Than Lwin Htun, Burmese service chief for U.S.-funded news service Voice of America.

As disappearances and nightly arrests — now captured and documented on social media — resume,

Than Lwin Htun, who is based in Washington, D.C., is determined to protect VOA's sources. But avoiding the "informer" label is more complicated than simply masking faces and withholding names. Just attending military press conferences, which Than Lwin Htun insists his team do, has drawn the ire of activists and other journalists.

"Most of the young journalists now, they hate the military. They are in a boycott mood. They don't want to seek any interviews," he says. "They say, 'Why should I be fair against this brutal military?' They are ready to pick up on anything given by the opposition side. For example, if somebody says the military shot and killed 80 people on the street, they don't want to verify. They are not hesitant to write straight away."

He doesn't blame them. As of Jan. 13, 115 journalists had been arrested and 44 were still in detention. Fifteen been formally charged, with five of them released. After initially facing deportation, three reporters who fled to neighboring Thailand are now in a third country where they are safe.

"WE WANT TO REMAIN ON THE SURFACE. WE DON'T WANT TO GO UNDERGROUND. WE DON'T HAVE EXILE DNA"

SONNY SWE, PUBLISHER

It is hard to remain objective and do due diligence when your friends and colleagues are being arrested and you could be next. Yet fairness and objectivity are about self-preservation as much as duty, according to Than Lwin Htun.

"It would be very disgraceful to be kicked out because of some mistake we should have avoided," he says.

In 2006, when an established contact had a source claim a storm wiped out an entire village near the southern coast, VOA couldn't get official confirmation. But the source was strong — allegedly a relative of a victim — so they ran the report. The next morning, Than Lwin Htun says photos were published in multiple outlets of the supposedly devastated village under the headline "VOA fabricates news."

Even in exile, Swe Win, editor-in-chief of Myanmar Now, urges his team against "activist journalism."

As he explains the concept, Swe Win sounds more like a professor than an editor, using terms like "universalities of humanity" to describe objectivity and shared experiences. He developed his philosophy in prison, where he spent seven years after being "caught red-handed with a stack of subversive leaflets" in 1998, he says.

"As long as your work is based on truth, you can still contribute to the fight for political causes. But the resistance must be based on truth," he says.

In practice, journalism kept its activist trappings. When the National League for Democracy (NLD) took power in 2015, it could do no wrong in the eyes of the press. But as the honeymoon phase ended, it simply shunned or became actively hostile to the media. In some cases, Aung San Suu Kyi appeared to tolerate police suppression. "You are fighting a monster, but you can also easily become a monster," says Swe Win.

Soe Myint agrees with Swe Win's criticisms, but he doesn't tell his staff to avoid activist journalism. He finds the entire discussion absurd. "I have never understood the term 'activist journalism,' which is particularly used in the West," Soe Myint says. "If someone is fighting for freedom, and you call that 'activism,' then it may be activism. You need to fight for this space."

In 1988, while photographing demonstrations for an underground student paper, a soldier took Soe Myint's camera after shoving him into an armored truck, where he watched peaceful protestors get mowed down, even children in their school uniforms. "I saw the killings all day, from morning until night," he says. "The next day I left for the border to take up arms."

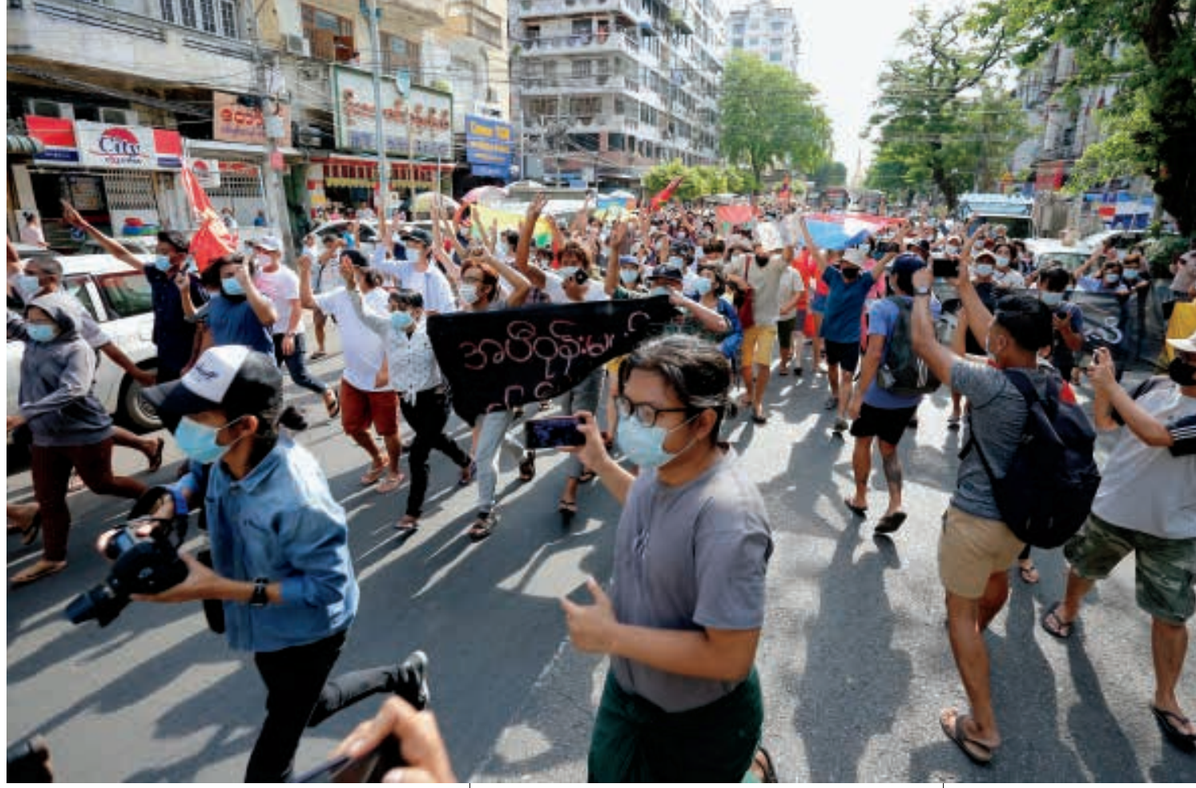
He received military training from ethnic Karen rebels planning to help overthrow the junta with weapons and support from abroad. But no weapons came, and Myanmar faded from global headlines. In 1991, he fled to India and eventually founded Mizzima Media, using his network of activists and "outlaw" journalists to spread news of Myanmar to the wider world.

For Soe Myint, taking up arms and founding a magazine were both acts of rebellion in a fight that never really ended; even when he returned home in 2011 and his publication was welcomed by the new civilian government, Soe Myint never trusted Myanmar's democracy. Now that armed thugs are once again deciding what people can and cannot say, he says there is no room for compromise, objectivity, or dialogue. If the military regime asks you not to use the word "coup" and you comply with that, he declares: "You are not a journalist."

Having once worked for Mizzima, Mratt talks about those who didn't follow Soe Myint into exile: the now-jobless reporters with families and bills. Some still write for their former publications, but the pay is low, and the work is dangerous. "Mizzima [editors] have left the country. Some [are] in Thailand, some in [Karen rebel] territory. They escaped the shit and are somewhere safe, but they left journalists in Yangon to report for them. It's shit for those journalists," Mratt says.

News magazine Frontier Myanmar decided to ease up on its on-the-ground coverage when the situation in the country grew too dangerous. The outlet hasn't stopped reporting on the protests, but it has also added more business stories and broader analysis to the mix. "We are not avoiding anything, we simply aren't going to give bullets to someone who is going to shoot us," says Frontier's co-founder, CEO, and publisher Sonny Swe. "I don't want to see my reporters going to prison." [Disclosure: I worked for Frontier from 2015 to 2019.]

Sonny Swe got into media as a businessman, not an activist. After co-founding his first company, The Myanmar Times, he spent much of the 2000s in jail for a seemingly politically motivated censorship violation charge. But he also doesn't share Soe Myint's cynical view of Myanmar's legitimate media. Brief as it was, democracy produced a new generation of publications and reporters who came into journalism as a legitimate



MYAT THU KYAW/NURPHOTO VIA AP

Myanmar journalists take cover during a protest against the military coup in central Yangon in May 2021. Some believe the crisis will inspire a new generation of journalists

institution. That institution is worth salvaging, Sonny Swe says: "We want to remain on the surface. We don't want to go underground. We don't have exile DNA."

Since the interview with Sonny Swe, Frontier managing editor Danny Fenster, an American, was arrested at Yangon International Airport. "We do not know why Danny was detained and have not been able to contact him. We are concerned for his wellbeing and call for his immediate release," a statement from the magazine read. Fenster was freed in November.

Even if the industry survives, nobody is quite sure what its future will be. Soe Myint predicts a stark divide between professional journalists and state propaganda, with nothing in between. Than Lwin Htun sees the emergence of a tightly-controlled digital space akin to China's Great Firewall. Sonny Swe says the real threat is simple economics: Even before the coup few news outlets were profitable, reporters were under-trained and underpaid, and the pandemic had pushed the industry to the brink.

But reporter Su — who requested anonymity for personal safety — believes the crisis could actually inspire the next generation of reporters, as the 8888 Uprising inspired veterans like Soe Myint. Su got into journalism not to fight an oppressive regime, but because they thought "journalist" meant "police intelligence:" "I watched Charlie's Angels, Angelina Jolie movies, so many spy movies. I wanted to become one of them."

Now, targeted by the military and shunned by the public, Su and colleagues have come to rely on grassroots networks of young amateurs who set up social media groups to exchange information on the protests and police crackdowns. Soon they began funneling this information to professional reporters, protecting themselves with VPN connections and single-use SIM cards.

Trusted by their local communities, but also too obscure to be targeted by police, these "citizen journalists" may define the next era of Myanmar press. But the young generation has something the exiled journalists of the '90s and '00s lacked: the memory of democracy.

Su and colleagues have spent their entire careers with basic protections for free speech. If press freedom wasn't quite what it was in the Global North, at least they didn't have to worry about being dragged out of their apartments at night for what they published. Their generation isn't fighting for a distant dream. They had that dream, and now they want it back.

"Before, many youths were not interested in the news, but now they want to know the news because they want democracy," Su says.

One of Su's volunteer colleagues is Ya — also not this person's real name — who had barely read a news article to the end, let alone written one. Ya told Su that after the coup, Ya began to devour news from both local and foreign publications to gain a better understanding of the political situation.

Ya hopes to learn the journalism trade one day, if things ever return to normal.

Until then, Ya will have to learn on the job.

"Of course, I'm afraid of being arrested. I've nearly been arrested," Ya says. "But if I don't do this, our news won't reach the media. No one will know what is happening in our country." ■

NIEMAN NOTES

1977

Hennie van Deventer's 22nd and final book, "Koerantkamerade" (Newspaper Comrades) was published in September by Naledi.

Verónica López was elected president of the National Association of Women Journalists in Chile.

1998

Howard Berkes is chair of the Advisory Board at Public Health Watch, a new investigative nonprofit focusing on public, environmental, and occupational health.

2004

Susan Orlean's collection of short stories on the animal-human relationships she's had during her writing career, titled "On Animals," was published in October by Simon and Schuster.

2006

Mary C. Curtis, a CQ Roll Call columnist and host of the "Equal Time with Mary C. Curtis" podcast, is the winner of the National Society of Newspaper Columnists' 2022 Ernie Pyle Lifetime Achievement Award.

2010

Beth Macy's bestselling book on the opioid crisis, "Dopesick," has been adapted into a Hulu series, starring Michael Keaton and Kaitlyn Dever. The first episode premiered in October.

2011

Michael Fitzgerald is the new editor-in-chief of Harvard Public Health Magazine. Previously, he served as the articles editor for The Boston Globe Magazine.

2012

Tyler Bridges is the author of a new book, "The Flight: A Father's War, A Son's Search," published by LSU Press in August. The book explores the story of his father, who parachuted out of his plane, the Fascinatin' Witch, after it was attacked by the Germans in World War II.

2013

Paula Molina's book, "Crisis, Terremotos y Estrellas: Chile a través de los ojos de destacados investigadores de la universidad de Harvard" (Crisis, Earthquakes and Stars: Chile through the eyes of leading researchers from Harvard University), was published by Aguilar in September.

Alexandra Garcia is the new senior visual editor of Headway, an initiative at The New York Times to investigate significant national and international challenges through the lens of progress.

Finbarr O'Reilly helped launch "Congo in Conversation" last year. The ongoing collaborative project is produced with Congolese journalists and photographers and addresses the country's human, social, and ecological challenges.

2014

Allissa V. Richardson is the author of "Bearing Witness While Black: African Americans, Smartphones & the New Protest #Journalism," which won the Frank Luther Mott Prize for the best journalism and mass communication book of 2020.

2015

Dawn Turner's new memoir, "Three Girls from Bronzeville: A Uniquely American Memoir of Race, Fate, and Sisterhood," was published by Simon and Schuster in September.

2016

Paul McNally, a 2016 Knight Visiting Nieman Fellow, is a co-founder and CEO of Volume, a company focused on African podcasts for a global audience that recently received investment support from the Media Development Investment Fund to bolster media innovation in southern Africa.

2018

Robert Socha is now a Google News Lab teaching fellow in Central and Eastern Europe. Previously, he was an investigative reporter at TVN Discovery in Poland.

2019

Francesca Panetta directed, edited, and designed the MIT Center for Advanced Virtuality's "In Event of Moon Disaster," which won the Emmy for outstanding interactive media/documentary. The project uses deepfake technology to demonstrate its potential for misinformation. 2019 Nieman affiliate **Magnus Bjerg** also worked on the film's concept design.

Kaeti Hinck was on the team at CNN Digital that worked on "How American police gear up to respond to protests." The piece won an Emmy in the outstanding interactive media/current news category.

2020

Alexander Trowbridge's "Field Testing," a five-part series on how to self-produce videos with Nieman Storyboard, was named a finalist in short form digital storytelling at the Online Journalism Awards. Trowbridge also recently joined CNN+ as a senior producer.

Erika Dilday, a 2020 Visiting Fellow, has been named the first Black executive director of American Documentary Inc. and executive producer of its documentary series "POV" on PBS and "America ReFramed" on the WORLD Channel.

Amy Silverman's new project Wordslaw continues the work she started with ProPublica's Local Reporting Network and the Arizona Daily Star in 2020. Wordslaw offers people with intellectual disabilities and other communities we don't hear from often enough space to tell their own stories.

2021

Austin Bogues has joined the opinion team at USA Today as a commentary editor. He was previously a reporter for the Asbury Park Press.

Scott Dance's reporting and fieldwork from his Abrams fellowship year has culminated in an occasional series about climate change in The Baltimore Sun.

Sarah Glover has been named managing editor of Minnesota Public Radio. She previously worked at NBC Owned Television Stations, where she served as manager of social media strategy, expanding the audience of NBC's 12 locally owned television station brands and offering strategic support to the more than 35 stations of Telemundo Local.

S. Mitra Kalita's new venture URL Media, a network of Black- and brown-owned media outlets that share content, distribution, and revenues, is the recipient of a new grant from the Archewell Foundation.

Anjuli Sastry has launched "Where We Come From," the project she researched as a 2021 Visiting Nieman Fellow. As creator and producer of the audio and video series, she invited immigrant communities of color to tell their own stories through oral histories and intergenerational conversations with family, friends, and experts.

Valeria Fernandez has launched "Comadres al Aire," a Spanish-language podcast she created with her colleague Maritza L. Félix, designed to address women's health issues in Latinx immigrant communities in the U.S. and reach those who don't have internet access.

2022

Natalia Viana is the co-founder and executive editor of Brazil's first non-profit investigative journalism outlet Agência Pública, which was named a small newsroom general excellence finalist at the Online Journalism Awards.

Gabrielle Schonder produced the Frontline documentary, "Love, Life, and the Virus," that won the Emmy for best story in a news magazine. The documentary follows a pregnant Covid-19 patient through an emergency delivery.

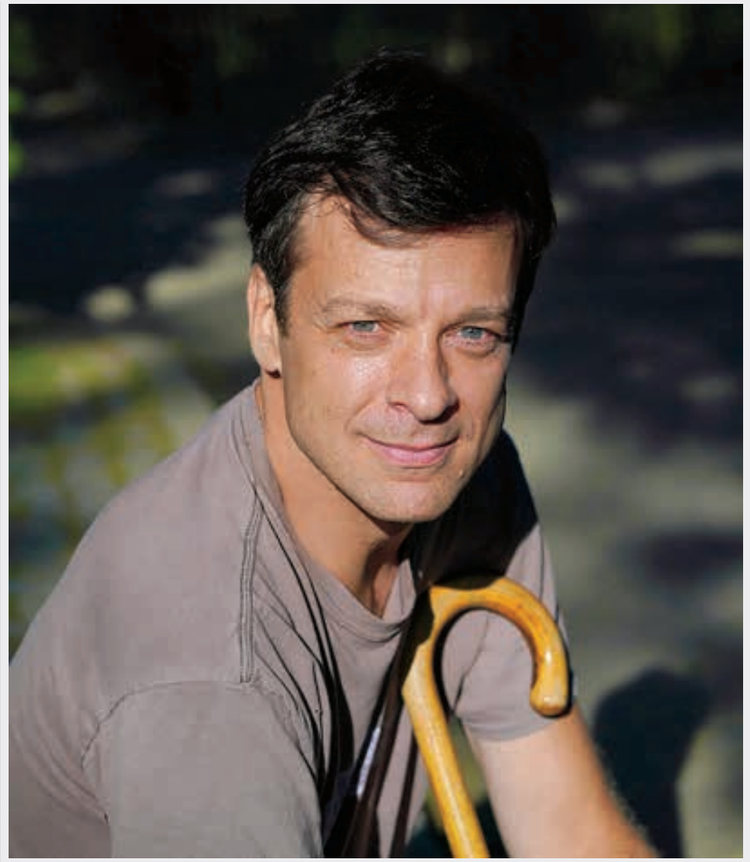
Dave Mayers, is a producer and cinematographer for "Vice News Tonight." The series won the Emmy for outstanding newscast. ■

Interviewing Jane Roe

Joshua Prager's new book tells the story of the woman behind the Supreme Court case

Since 1973, Roe v. Wade — the Supreme Court's landmark decision on abortion — has been a household name for many Americans. Less known to the public, however, is the woman behind the case: Norma McCorvey, who assumed the Jane Roe pseudonym in front of the court. **Joshua Prager, NF '11**, set out to tell McCorvey's story in his new book, "The Family Roe: An American Story," published by W.W. Norton in September. With over a decade of research and hundreds of hours of interviews with McCorvey, Prager reveals in great detail McCorvey's unwanted pregnancy, her oscillating presence in both the pro-choice and pro-life movements, and her complex role as the face of Roe. And for the first time, the public hears from the three daughters McCorvey gave up to adoption, including "the Roe baby," whom McCorvey gave birth to before the court arrived at its decision.

Prager's book is timely: In September, just as "The Family Roe" hit bookshelves, a legal battle ensued in Texas after the state legislature effectively banned abortions starting at six weeks of pregnancy. At the national level, the Supreme Court has heard arguments on a Mississippi abortion ban — and, with a conservative majority on the court, Roe sits in a precarious position. McCorvey and her children are not the only ones deeply impacted by Roe and its aftermath, Prager told Nieman Reports, nor are they the only family his book considers:



PETER VAN AGTMAEL PHOTOS

Joshua Prager spent hundreds of hours with Norma McCorvey for "The Family Roe"

"There's the larger family [in the book] as well, and what I mean by that is the tens of millions of people in this country who are connected in some very organic way to the issue of abortion in America."

With over 700 pages, "The Family Roe" is nuanced and complex — an approach that stems from Prager's journalistic background.

"I did not write this book as an advocate. I wrote it as a journalist. And what motivated me above all, was being honest and fair, and treating my subjects with empathy," Prager said. ■

SOUNDING

Journalism Helped Me Regain Power Over My Own Story

Finding meaning, agency, and purpose in reporting from my home country of Venezuela

BY PATRICIA LAYA

In November of 2017, I made the unpopular decision to move back home to Venezuela.

Most people are going in the other direction. More than 5.6 million Venezuelans have left the country, including most of my own family, since 2015 to escape an unprecedented political and economic crisis. The mass exodus has become the largest displacement crisis in the region's history.

Moving back after eleven years away wasn't an easy decision, and it involved convincing my family — mainly my mother — that I would be okay in a country where food shortages are the norm, access to healthcare is increasingly complicated, and power and running water are a luxury. I couldn't really sugarcoat it because they knew what I was getting into. In fact, like millions of others, they had spent the last decade trying to escape it.

But the truth is, I was working as an economics reporter for Bloomberg in Washington, D.C., but my mind was elsewhere. For months, I had woken up to shaky video footage of protesters clashing with security forces under clouds of tear gas. I had fallen asleep swiping through photos of homemade shields and shallow graves. I was helplessly watching my country's demise and desperately wanted to be in the middle of it. So, legs shaking, I packed my bags and returned to my hometown of Caracas.

It's no surprise I found a very different place than the one I'd left. In the late 1940s, Caracas was the city of infinite opportunity that my maternal grandparents called home after escaping the Spanish civil war and Franco's military dictatorship. In the early 1970s, it was the city where my parents could walk to school and hitchhike to the beach. But this was not the Caracas my sisters and I grew

up in. Instead, due to my family's relative privilege, it was one that we mainly experienced through car windows or from behind tall fences wrapped in barbed wire. In 2017, I returned to a city that mostly just felt empty and abandoned.

Hoping to reconnect with Caracas after so many years away, I decided to take up running. I'd lace up my shoes and hit the pavement shortly after sunrise, and suddenly, I could run confidently past the streets I had been told to stay away from as a child. The city that I loved and belonged to but had somehow felt so distant started growing around me, one kilometer at a time.

> **I was helplessly watching my country's demise and desperately wanted to be in the middle of it**

For most of my life, I felt like a passive victim of the seismic political shifts that had shaped my country. And just like running allowed me to regain ownership over my own city, journalism has helped me to regain power over my own story. Being a reporter gave me the power to actively witness and reveal what once felt disempowering. In his book "The Politics of Storytelling," Harvard Divinity School Professor Michael D. Jackson describes storytelling as giving us a sense that even though we do not exactly determine the course of our lives, we can at least have a hand in defining their meaning.

I found meaning, agency, and purpose in reporting on Venezuela and its people: the pregnant women navigating a broken health care system, the growing tribes of street kids flooding the city streets, and the surreality of a booming luxury dollar market as hunger gnawed away at vast portions of the population.

Yet as Bloomberg's Bureau Chief, I belonged to a privileged group of correspondents who could earn thousands of dollars a month for reporting on Venezuela for international media. The average local journalist working for an independent outlet would be lucky to make a couple hundred dollars over the same period.

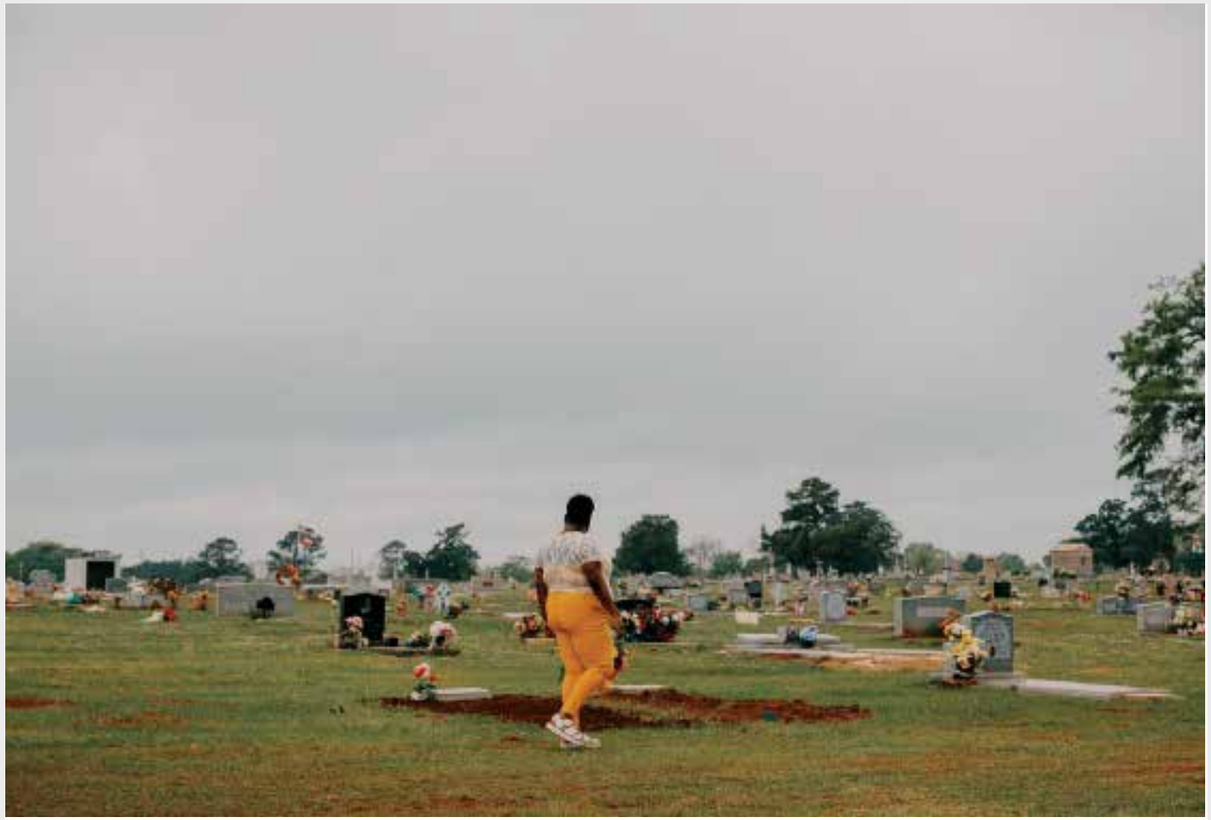
During my time as a Nieman fellow, I want to think more deeply about how decades of hunger, desperation, and disease have stripped Venezuelans from their roles as political beings. What will that mean when it's time to rebuild our country?

After years of interviewing Venezuelans across the political divide, I understood that if you take the time to be curious about someone, mainly those you disagree with, it's much easier to see how you would have made the same choices had you been in their shoes.

Moving back to Caracas was a difficult decision, but it was the best decision I've ever made. I like to think everyone has their version of Caracas, a literal or figurative place that makes it all worth it. The reason why we put so much of ourselves into our work.

Whatever that reason is, I hope it inspires you to lace up your running shoes and race towards the fire. ■

Patricia Laya, a 2022 Nieman Fellow, is the former Venezuela bureau chief for Bloomberg.



AFTERIMAGE

Covering Covid-19 and Connecting with Sources in Quiet Moments

"When I am creating portraits of someone, I like to ask them to take me to places that mean something to them. Cemeteries are sacred ground, and it was special to me to be able to have Latasha offer to show me where her family was buried. It was a peaceful but very emotional time we shared reflecting on what she has been through in the pandemic. "

Bethany Mollenkof, photojournalist and 2021 Nieman Visiting Fellow, on photographing the devastation the coronavirus is bringing to southern and rural Black communities

Latasha Taylor visits in April 2021 the cemetery in Cuthbert, Georgia, where her mother, aunt, and uncle — all of whom succumbed to Covid-19 — are buried.

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