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Dear America

**Journalists around the world on what to expect
when press freedom comes under attack**

PUBLISHER
Ann Marie Lipinski

EDITOR
Laura Colarusso

MANAGING EDITOR
Samantha Henry

CONTRIBUTING EDITOR
Henry Chu

ASSISTANT EDITOR
Megan Cattel

DESIGN
Dan Zedek

EDITORIAL OFFICES
One Francis Avenue
Cambridge, MA 02138-2111
nreditor@harvard.edu

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Contributors



Gabe Bullard is a writer, editor, and audio producer. He has worked on the NPR shows “Here & Now” and “1A,”

where he was a founding digital producer. He was news director of Louisville Public Media, deputy news director for audio at WAMU/DCist, and deputy director of digital news for National Geographic. He was a 2015 Nieman Fellow.



Puja Changoiwala is an award-winning journalist and author who reports on human rights concerns in India.

She has authored three books, received more than a dozen Indian and international awards, and reported for over 50 publications worldwide, including the BBC, CNN, The Washington Post, The Guardian, and National Geographic.



Ann Cooper was a 2020 Joan Shorenstein Fellow at Harvard Kennedy School’s

Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy. She served as executive director of the Committee to Protect Journalists from 1998 until June 2006 and is a professor emerita at the Columbia University School of Journalism.



Marc Fisher is an associate editor and columnist at The Washington Post, where he has worked for 38 years

as a reporter, foreign correspondent, and editor. He is the author of three books: “Trump Revealed,” a biography of Donald Trump; “Something in the Air,” a history of radio after TV came along; and “After the Wall,” an account of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany.



Marigo Farr is a climate and equity reporter with 10 years of expertise in the nonprofit sector, where she worked

on policy in environmental and food justice, housing, municipal budgets, and healthcare. She holds a master’s degree in journalism from Northeastern University and is a former Grist Climate Solutions Fellow. She splits her time between editing, freelance writing, and teaching journalism classes.



Sandrine Rigaud is a French investigative journalist and filmmaker who most recently served as

editor-in-chief of Forbidden Stories, a global network of journalists pursuing the work of silenced journalists. Since 2019, she has coordinated many cross-border investigations including the Pegasus Project and the Cartel Project, which won the George Polk Award in 2020 and 2021, respectively. She is a 2025 Nieman Fellow.



Laurel Chor is an Emmy-nominated journalist, photographer, filmmaker, and National Geographic

Explorer from Hong Kong. Her work has appeared in National Geographic, The New York Times, VICE, HBO, SHOWTIME, Getty Images, CNN, The Washington Post, Reuters, Al Jazeera, AFP, and other outlets. She is currently directing and producing an independent documentary on the front lines of the war in Donbas, Ukraine, as well as a film on human-manta ray relations with support from the National Geographic Society. Her reporting has been recognized with numerous awards, including an honorable mention for the IWMF Anja Niedringhaus Courage in Photojournalism Award and the Overseas Press Club of America’s David A. Andelman and Pamela Title Award. ■



Sophie Park, 26, is a freelance photojournalist based in Boston. Like many in her generation, she juggles freelance journalism assignments with other photographic work to supplement her income.

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Layoffs, falling ratings, and a growing digital divide: NPR and local member stations are rethinking public radio’s future by adopting strategies for survival.



The Future of American Democracy Amid Deepening Polarization

Harvard professor **Archon Fung** on the country's political divisions and strategies for reaching across party lines.

The election of Donald Trump to a new term as president has underscored how politically divided Americans remain — possibly more than at any other time in the last 50 years, with a majority of both Republicans and Democrats viewing the opposing side as the biggest threat to democracy, various studies show. The polarization has undermined faith in traditional news media, in political conciliation and cooperation, and in the U.S. electoral system itself.

Archon Fung, the Winthrop Laffin McCormack Professor of Citizenship and Self-Government at Harvard Kennedy School, spoke to the current class of Nieman Fellows and to Nieman Reports in October about the deep fissures, the shifts in the American electorate, and ways of mitigating division during an election year and beyond.

On growing election skepticism among the American electorate

One thing that's quite different compared to 2020 is three or four out of every 10 Americans just do not believe that Joe Biden won the 2020 election. So election skepticism and doubt is a mass phenomenon, and public opinion is much, much wider than it has been, maybe ever, in American history. Another thing on the negative side is that at the more elite level of parties, campaigns, and election lawyering, the efforts to cast some doubt on the result of the 2020 election were kind of a dry run, and now people sowing that doubt ... have a set of [more] sophisticated strategies.

I think that people have learned a lot, especially the secretaries of state and election administrators, about the real threat of political violence, how to defend against that, [and] strategies to instill more confidence in the election apparatus. In the run-up to Jan. 6 and the effort to question

the 2020 certification of electors in the Electoral College, nobody really expected that, or [knew] how to defend against it. Now, there's a lot of people thinking about what the different avenues of attack might be.

So, I think at least in my lifetime, the level of political threat and violence and intimidation is just at a qualitatively higher level. It's so much more widespread in the last four years. [In] surveys of election officials and election workers, something like three or four out of 10 said that they've experienced some kind of threat or intimidation, and many of those are leaving the job because of that.

I think in your journalism, you can see this, even if you don't work in the political sphere. If you cover a city council meeting or a school board meeting, you will encounter lots and lots of hostility.

On ways to reduce distrust in media and political polarization

[People] need institutions that they can rely on. They need a working media. They need a working education system. They need reliable sources of information of all kinds. I mean, it [will] take a long time to get all the way there.

I think that a first step, though, is for all of us to be more open-minded about what's true and what's not. That's why I don't

“**Election skepticism and doubt is a mass phenomenon, and public opinion is much, much wider than it has been, maybe ever, in American history.**”

like the term “misinformation,” because it suggests that it's pretty easy to tell what's misinformation and then what's true. I think the Covid experience just shows that's not the case. I was making fun — just like everybody else in Massachusetts — of people not wearing masks and not wanting to social distance — I made fun of them as hating grandma and hating science. And that was just really, really wrong.

I don't think it works to try to shove facts down people's throats. ... I think you've got to try to meet people where they are and reason out from that.

In Maricopa County, Arizona, one of the best, most noble election directors in the country is Stephen Richer. And one of the things that he's doing in his office is encouraging him and his staff to meet with election skeptics just over coffee and breakfast. You don't talk about the election, you talk about your kid's soccer game or whatever, just to begin to build some kind of tapestry, and then maybe you can deal with the election skepticism. And then maybe if things really, really go south in 2024, you'll have a phone number to call and somebody doesn't get killed.

I think listening does help. In these bridge-building things, people form these relationships and these bonds that continue.

On structural reforms to reduce polarization

I think a particular pathology of the United States, which journalists and people at the local level and political scientists can't do anything about, is the two-party system. It's a lot easier, although still difficult, in our turbulent times, to depolarize if there's more than two parties. If there's three [or] four parties, political scientists call it crosscutting cleavages. There's just more dimensions of play there.

In the United States, there should absolutely be at least four parties, right? There should be a Biden traditionalist Democratic Party, there should be an AOC/Bernie party, there should be a traditional Mitt Romney/Liz Cheney Democrat-Republican Party, and there should be a MAGA party. And if that were the political configuration, I think that would change all of the political reporting, because the campaigns would feel much different.

On the changing electorate

There's a bunch of research, some of it by [French economist and academic]



Archon Fung speaks at the Nieman Foundation's 85th anniversary celebration in October 2023 on the dangers of political polarization.

Thomas Piketty, that shows that in the United States and in Europe, one of the biggest cleavages now between the left and right populist parties is education. So, with higher education voters voting more Democrat in this case, it used to be the case that high education voters were Republicans predominantly, and so that's flipped, and socioeconomic status is a wash. It used to be strongly [that] the Democratic Party used to draw from people lower on the income scale. Now it's flat. So you may see this pivot happening in which the Democrats stand for the kind of responsible business class and the Republicans are a much more [economically] populist class, which I don't think anybody's ready for psychically.

[For journalists to cover this more effectively] you can recognize the plurality of identities. A lot of Democrats are a little chagrined by why more Latinos are not [voting] Democrat, especially in light of the immigration rhetoric and so on. And I think part of that might be to recognize that we all have multiple identities. The Latino person in South Texas is not just Latino, not just a second-generation immigrant, but also a worker. For a pro-

life woman, she is a woman, but is also Catholic, and maybe a certain kind of traditional family is very important to her identity.

So I think there's two different strategies for the reporter. One is to try to really dig into what the subgroups are. ... I think one mistake is to privilege an identity, race, and ethnicity above, for instance, considerations like where they are on the economic ladder or educational status ... and religion. So pay attention to the many different axes, not just race and ethnicity.

Then I think a second is to pay attention to what the political leaders are offering them. [Someone] trying to do the political analysis from a progressive orientation is missing that many African Americans and many Latino people, Hispanic people, are also working class, and right now the Republicans have a stronger working-class appeal.

On issues where he'd like to see more coverage

So, political reporting is about Democrats and Republicans, who's winning, and sometimes it's about polarization and us fighting with each other, and that's

all super important. But what I would like to be able to communicate with journalists and through journalism are two different kinds of topics. One is about the political structure that's determining a lot of this, like the Electoral College, like gerrymandering, like the two-party system. These are things that are like the structure of the house, or the shape of the stage that the play is occurring on. I think readers are less interested in that because it's like, not the debate that you're seeing between the presidential candidates or the VPs. But it's super, super important. So how do you find a way to talk about that?

The second is the innovations that might make things better. [For example,] we should just have a modern election system that's as good as it can be. There's tons of stuff [on] running elections that could be a lot better, that are innovations and improvements.

Then there's also bigger innovations, like citizen assemblies or constitutional conventions, or all of these ways to do democracy that are more common in Europe and in parts of the Global South, that are not in the United States, that we could learn a lot from. ■



Duke Ellington smiles for a photograph in New York on April 24, 1969. Ellington is just one subject in Larry Tye's latest book, "The Jazzmen."

The Intersection of Two All-American Stories

Larry Tye, NF '94, on his latest book, "The Jazzmen"

The story of the Pullman porters is a gift that is still giving. The Black men who worked on George Pullman's elegant sleeping cars for the century after the Civil War first shared their inspiring narratives about rising from the rails to reshape their world. After I wrote a book about them, they said I had to write another about their favorite athlete, Satchel Paige, and I had a grand time doing that. But the story they wanted told most was of their three best-loved passengers and friends: Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington, Louis "Satchmo" Armstrong, and William "Count" Basie.

So here we are with my latest book: "The Jazzmen: How Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong and Count Basie Transformed America."

"The Jazzmen" lies at the intersection of two American stories — one about this country at its most hidebound and strait-laced and the other about jazz, the all-American music form, at its most locomotive and sensuous. I explore how the Count, Satchmo, and Duke framed their times even as they were framed by them. Each overcame racial barriers not by waging war over every indignity, which

would have accomplished little during the Jim Crow era, but by opening America's ears and souls to the marvelousness of their melodies. Each insisted he was a music maker first and last, when in reality all three were cultural and racial insurgents — and not just in America. Across the planet, Ellington, Basie, and most of all Armstrong became symbols of American culture on par with Coca-Cola and Mickey Mouse.

How better to bring alive the history of America in the early-to-mid-1900s than through the lens of its most gifted, engaging, and enduring African American musicians? And although this is a book about struggle, it has a triumphal ending. These three jazzmen's irresistible tunes keep our feet tapping to this day, and their lives resonate in the way they quietly upended how musical dynasties are constructed and how human rights are secured.

I have been aching to tell this story for a quarter-century, since my year as a Nieman Fellow. First semester, I took a survey course on jazz, which reinforced my love for the music by introducing me to its greatest practitioners. Later that year,

I talked my way into a seminar on Duke Ellington taught by Mark Tucker, a visiting professor from Columbia and an Ellington biographer who helped my classmates and me see his brilliance as a composer and bandleader as well as his passion for civility and justice.

Four questions might rightfully be asked about my book. Why are all my title characters jazz men, with no women, and why these three men? Why revisit this 50-year-old story now? And why trust an author who barely knew the difference between harmony and melody?

Jazz women are an essential part of this narrative, same as they were in early jazz history and in the orchestras of Basie, Ellington, and Armstrong. I recount the spellbinding stories of Billie Holiday, Mary Lou Williams, Lillian Hardin Armstrong, and others throughout the book. I also make clear that my choice of title characters is subjective, and that a parade of other musicians — from Holiday and Williams to Dizzy Gillespie and Miles Davis — also were compelling changemakers. As for timing, there is no moment more fitting than this era of racial reckoning to look back at three figures who stood for the racial justice that is still in the spotlight today.

I tried to make a strength out of being a novice, filling in my gaps by tracking down and talking to 250 of my subjects' aging bandmates, friends, relatives, and biographers. I dug deep into musty files at jazz archives and newspaper libraries around the world and especially where they lived and worked, from New Orleans, Kansas City, and Chicago to New York, Red Bank, N.J., and Washington, D.C. There are hundreds of volumes on my shelves of musical biographies of Armstrong, Basie, and Ellington. But my book zeroes in on their lives off, not on, their bandstands, and what America was like in a period I have written about repeatedly, from the Roaring Twenties through the Swinging Sixties.

Their anthems made visible the invisible stories of Black America, from slavery through segregation and desegregation, infusing them into the American songbook and psyche. All thrived professionally for an unheard-of half-century and defined their eras as few others did. Dizzy Gillespie was talking about Satchmo but it could as easily have been Duke or the Count when he declared, "No him, no me." ■

JOHN DURICK/AP



The Paso del Norte International Bridge connects the U.S.-Mexico border cities of El Paso, Texas, and Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua state.

Unraveling Misinformation About the Border

Alfredo Corchado, NF '09, dispels myths and rumors about immigration.

A few weeks before the U.S. election, I traveled to Wisconsin, the crucial battleground state some 1,500 miles away from what's been described as a place where evil runs rampant, a place which also happens to be my home. El Paso felt very present in the Badger State — at least the distorted, overhyped version of it in the "open border" narratives running incessantly in political ads.

I was in Wisconsin in part to understand how disinformation travels wide and far. The televised portrayal of my borderlands home was so scary that it kept me awake into the wee hours. But the endless images of rapists, murderers, and fentanyl — monsters all — sneaking across from Mexico to threaten America was a reminder of the daunting task ahead.

I'm the executive editor and a correspondent for Puente News Collaborative, a bilingual nonprofit online newsroom whose mission is to support local newsrooms and to provide original, fact-based coverage to counter misinformation. My colleagues, Eduardo Garcia and Dudley Althaus, and I face

the uphill job of challenging this border narrative, pushing back with facts on the ground. Part of the strategy is to work with reporters in these border regions and place stories in local media outlets in a growing number of news deserts in order to break the silence on immigration.

Few regions in the country have been more impacted by the collapse of local news than the U.S.-Mexico border. Ten of the 23 counties in that area now have either a single local news organization, a "ghost newsroom" with no real staff or original reporting, or nothing at all.

Puente's task is to pursue stories that reflect the border's reality and the people it affects. We serve audiences both at the border and beyond in places like Wisconsin and Pennsylvania, or interior Mexican states such as Querétaro and Guanajuato.

Our task seems especially urgent at a time when many Americans are looking for an enemy within.

These Americans want it both ways, using the cheap labor that immigrants provide, while loathing the unavoidable change that the newcomers bring. They want their crops harvested, hotel rooms cleaned, yards trimmed, and new roofs installed. But they also want to demonize the immigrants — legal and undocumented alike — who in many cases provide the backbone of the economy. And they take particular aim at

Mexico, the country that's now the United States' leading trade partner.

For nearly a week, Dudley and I traveled throughout Wisconsin, along the southeastern shore of Lake Michigan and down two-lane roads that cut into the state's farmlands. We witnessed how newcomers are remaking century-old neighborhoods and small towns that were once home to immigrants from Germany, Poland, Serbia, Ireland, and elsewhere.

As I reported on their perceptions about the border, I also pushed back on the disinformation I saw and heard. I reminded Midwesterners that I traveled from one of the safest regions anywhere in the United States and that El Paso represents a peek into the future of changing economic and cultural forces. We talked about the people who come through the border with or without documents, and how our future is tied to theirs. We traded notes on products crisscrossing the border — everything from tractors to electronics to produce, and hundreds of other things trucks carry north and south. We swapped stories that provided a glimpse of hope in a divisive, polarized society.

The experience reinforced we can — through stories — begin to humanize this complex issue and, in doing so, rebuild borderland newsrooms. Only then can the false narrative of the border be dispelled. ■

CORRIE BOUDREAU

MIXED SIGNALS

FM radio kept the
NPR system resilient well
into the digital age.
Now the lifeline is fraying.

BY GABE BULLARD

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ANDREA DE SANTIS



A

T THE END OF SUMMER, the leaders of the nearly 250 public radio stations in the United States received a memo from NPR headquarters in Washington — “the mother ship,” as many station employees call it — about coverage plans for the coming months. Each station has its own hosts, reporters, and management, but memos like this have a tremendous bearing on those stations, because NPR shows like “Morning Edition” and “All Things Considered” are the tentpoles of the broadcast day. And for the last few years, those tentpoles had been sinking. Ratings at stations across the country dropped an average of 22 percent from 2017.

In the memo, National Public Radio Editor-in-Chief Edith Chapin outlined plans to hold on to, and even grow, the listening audience. The “one-size-fits-all” approach for radio, podcasts, and digital “does not work,” she wrote. The platforms have different audiences and they need unique attention, particularly on radio, where the audience was not only shrinking but was also getting older. “More than two thirds of our broadcast audience is over 45, but for more than five years the only age demographic that has grown in that audience are those over 65,” Chapin wrote. The new plan was to focus on securing listeners between the ages of 40 and 64 with stories that run for less than five minutes and focus on “personal relevance” to the audience. More stories would center on “joy and wonder, space and science, personal finance, health and wellness.” (The memo also promised that NPR would “address tactics for podcasts and digital in the months ahead.”)

In response to questions about the memo, NPR says this doesn’t signal a retreat from politics or other core coverage areas — it’s an effort to engage and attract the audience most likely to listen to FM radio by giving them stories in a style that research shows keeps them listening.

The push for steadier and stronger broadcast listenership comes at a time of intense challenges from digital audio and personnel cuts across the public radio system. A New York Times story last spring laid bare the challenges NPR faces, including lower sponsorship revenue, difficulty diversifying staff and audiences, and concerns about strategy from the stations that carry NPR shows and support the network through licensing payments. These stations are each facing their own difficulties, and while some are developing strategies to secure a local audience, others are hoping for support and guidance from the mother ship. “There is no single equation for every station,” Chapin wrote in an email comment. “And that’s why we’re working closely with our station partners to address these different factors.”



Not long ago, many of these stations were growing. Revenue to NPR and stations, as well as spending on programming and news, climbed throughout the 2010s. Stations hired journalists and launched new reporting initiatives. They invested in digital news; some in Washington, Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago even bought imperiled digital news publications. At times, it seemed like stations might be the key to keeping their communities from becoming news deserts. The money for these investments came from a variety of sources — foundations, major donors, grants (though federal funding for public radio is a small and shrinking amount) — but members, acquired largely through on-air pledge drives, were always the stations' most vital source of support.

Through this digital transformation, radio remained resilient, the rare legacy medium that had a reliable and profitable audience. "If you looked at what was happening with traditional media, if you looked at newspapers, it was not happening to radio," says Jim Taszarek, founder of Market Engineuity, a company that sells sponsorships for public radio stations. (Called underwriting, these sponsorships are essentially the nonprofit equivalent of advertising, with restrictions on what can be said.) In 2014, the analytics firm Edison Research found that of all the time people spent listening to audio — music, podcasts, anything — half of it went to radio.

In the last two years, stations have encountered what several people I talked to described as a "perfect storm" of technological disruption, news fatigue, and the pandemic, which led to a drop in ratings. Lower ratings made pledge drives less effective. Competition for financial support encroached from all sides — from behemoths like The New York Times, from startup nonprofit newsrooms, and from any podcast with a Patreon page. Sponsors, meanwhile, opted to micro-target audiences online through Google and Facebook, rather than try to reach an aging and shrinking listenership through radio. That spending has only shrunk further under post-pandemic inflation, with sponsors looking for safer, surer bets and having more places to spend than ever.

The result is layoffs. Local stations and the NPR mother ship in Washington have cut more than 400 jobs in nearly two years. Sometimes these cuts have chipped away at the digital investment that once seemed

essential to the stations' futures. Leadership at WAMU in Washington, D.C. (full disclosure: I worked there for many years), shut down the DCist news site and fired most of its staff six years after purchasing it amid much fanfare about shoring up local news. Stations WNYC and LAist (formerly KPCC) made multiple rounds of cuts, slashing their staff by double-digit percentages, including deep reductions in podcasting divisions.

Radio had once subsidized growth. Now it's a fraying lifeline, and stations are figuring out what it means to be public radio when broadcast radio is less important than ever. "Total media ad sales has grown, total audio consumption has been steady," Daphne Kwon, NPR's chief financial officer, said in a statement. "There are simply more choices than ever for consumers both on platform and content which makes everything tougher for traditional media providers."

To some degree, the pandemic accelerated what many people in the industry saw as inevitable as digital media expanded and audiences aged. "We really believed, or at least I believed, that the runway we had with broadcast listenership was much longer than it actually was, and I was pretty pessimistic to begin with," says Kristen Muller, chief content officer of LAist. (Muller left LAist in October, but spoke to Nieman Reports for this story before announcing her resignation.) "If you'd asked [at the] beginning of 2020, I would have said five years. It turned out to be six months."

LAist, in many ways, exemplifies just how quickly the decline hit and how difficult the move to digital revenue is proving to be. The station, one of two major NPR outlets serving Los Angeles, had a robust audio operation: It broadcast to the region's significant commuting population with a mix of NPR shows and its own original programming. In 2018, the station, then going by its FM call letters KPCC, purchased the LAist news site, which was among several sites shuttered by the Gothamist organization and bought by public radio stations. In 2019, the station organized its podcast production under a division called LAist Studios.

These were boom years for public radio. Audiences were hungry to follow the 2016 election and the early years of the Trump administration. In the fall of 2016, listeners to public radio stations across the country brought NPR its highest-ever broadcast ratings. Radio ratings always have peaks and valleys, and some softening seemed inevitable after such fast growth. Around 2019, the concept of "news fatigue" began affecting many news outlets, which saw that their election-era gains might soon fall off.

In any other year, such a drop might be thought of as a routine valley or a correction to a new normal. But before anyone could determine what a new normal for ratings might be, the Covid-19 pandemic upended listening entirely in a way that radio hasn't, and may never, recover from.

Without the daily commuter audience, listening plummeted. KPCC, like many other stations, was able to secure money from the federal Payroll Protection



Program. Muller saw this as a time to further lean into LAist and LAist Studios. "That money was essentially socked away into reserves, and we believed that in order to aggressively build a new audience ... we needed to resource it. And so we essentially made the bet that investing in our digital audience growth with that money would pay off, and that we'd find a way to monetize that digital audience as we went along," she says.

In 2023, the station rebranded as LAist, dropping its call letters and embracing a digital identity on-air. On paper, the move recognized an inevitable trend for FM radio. When Covid restrictions lifted, many listeners continued commuting, but they did it less — two days a week instead of five, for example. Others had grown used to new routines built around podcasts, and many were driving cars that defaulted to Bluetooth connections instead of FM radio. By 2023, the number of people listening to radio had dropped 21 percent from 2018. In 2024, Edison Research found that listeners spent more time with their phones than with the radio, and more time with on-demand audio (podcasts, audiobooks, playlists, YouTube) than linear (streaming or broadcast radio).

Podcasting doesn't generate as much revenue as radio, which became clear in 2023, in both for-profit and public media. Spotify, which had previously invested a billion dollars in the medium, cut jobs and canceled shows, as did stations like WNYC. Ad sales weren't mak-

ing back the investment for most shows. Meanwhile, small podcasters proliferated on platforms where fans could give a nominal amount to support their favorite shows. More than 40,000 podcasters earned a collective \$350 million on Patreon in 2023. These shows aren't necessarily journalistic (or even full-time jobs), but they are competing for attention and dollars from people who might otherwise listen and pledge to public radio. "We used to be the only crowdfunders out there," says Abby Goldstein, president of the Public Media Content Collective, essentially a group of local public radio station leaders who decide what their stations puts on their airwaves, websites, and podcast feeds. "Nobody else was asking audiences for money, and now everybody's asking audiences for money." In June 2023, citing declining revenue, LAist cut 12 percent of its staff, or 21 jobs.

At the same time as the collapse of podcast ads, underwriting fell off a cliff for LAist. The writers' and actors' strikes in Hollywood froze promotion and production of movies and television, which locked out a major segment of LAist's support. As that money began to flow again, it went to other outlets. "All these entertainment companies who used to rely on places like us, you know, now they've got a gajillion niche publications and gajillion niche podcasts that are only focused on the entertainment industry. So the money starts flowing differently," Muller says.

"We used to be the only crowdfunders out there. Nobody else was asking audiences for money, and now everybody's asking audiences for money."

Abby Goldstein, president of the Public Media Content Collective

“Total media ad sales has grown, total audio consumption has been steady. There are simply more choices than ever for consumers both on platform and content which makes everything tougher for traditional media providers.”

Daphne Kwon, NPR's chief financial officer

Even stations in markets that haven't experienced a similar disruption have noticed on-air sponsorship opportunities vanishing. “Sponsors and advertisers want to avoid news. It just feels too negative to them,” Taszarek says. The larger threat, though, is the drop in radio sponsorship altogether. About half of local sponsorship money is now spent on digital ads, including services from Facebook and Google, which more precisely target users based on web activity, Taszarek adds. Many stations simply haven't built up the digital audience and sponsorship networks to compete with this new reality. “There are good digital products and we can sell them. There's just not enough,” Taszarek says. “There's just not enough to replace broadcast.”

This past summer, LAist laid off another 21 staff members. Among the reasons for the cuts was a budget shortfall caused by what Muller at the time called “slower-than-anticipated digital monetization” after the digital rebrand.

“I'm saying this knowing it's going to be controversial, but we weren't quick enough to truly understand what it takes to drive digital loyalty,” Muller says. She cites the idea that it takes some listeners 10 years of regularly hearing NPR before they decide to donate. “Entire companies have come and gone in 10 years,” she says. “You just don't have that kind of window.”

LAist has also faced controversies over management and leadership. Tax filings for 2021 showed that a former CEO earned \$500,000 as president emeritus even after retiring. In light of this, the union (LAist is represented by SAG-AFTRA) called staff cuts an “outrage.” Executive pay at WNYC has also been a sticking point in negotiations over layoffs. There, SAG-AFTRA argued that the cuts would hurt their ability to serve the city and could be avoided through furloughs, office changes, or reductions in executive pay, among other options. And at Capital Public Radio in Sacramento, \$760,000 went to the former general manager in mysterious payments that are still being investigated. Beyond the hefty payments, headlines about big spending can make listeners question whether they should give. “We're painting a picture of an organization where everybody is working their fingers to the bone and barely able to make a living, and that does describe some of the people who are working at public radio stations and in public broad-

casting, but it definitely is not what's happening at the top of the shiniest and most prominent stations,” says Alicia Montgomery, a 20-year employee at NPR who is now vice president of audio at Slate.

During the pandemic, staff at a number of stations have unionized, and while union shops have still seen cuts, employees are building a bargaining power they previously lacked — pushing for cuts to come from overall spending and management structures instead of from the newsroom rank and file. Muller says LAist executives took a 10 percent pay reduction in the last round of budget-cutting.

After the cuts and with a mix of revenue, Muller says LAist is now on track to hit its budget for the next fiscal year. Broadcast is still the main source of revenue, though Muller says digital is growing quickly. “The public radio mission in 20 years is not going to be on the radio,” Muller says.

Layoffs in journalism have hardly been limited to public radio. Some 2,700 jobs were cut across the industry in 2023, with the pace continuing into 2024. But as the stability of FM and sponsorship faltered, public radio was no longer isolated from the tumult. In 2023, NPR cut about 100 employees. New York Public Radio, which operates WNYC, cut about 40. This year, the cuts have seemed almost constant: 15 at Colorado Public Radio; eight at Louisville Public Media; 26 more at WNYC; 19 at KQED in San Francisco; 14 in Chicago; 31 at WGBH in Boston. The other Boston NPR station, WBUR, cut 14 percent of its staff. (I also worked at Louisville Public Media and WBUR.)

For stations, finding a sustainable future isn't just a question of monetization but of local identity. Most station schedules consist almost entirely of national programming, from NPR or outlets like PRX and American Public Media, nonprofit organizations that produce and distribute shows. Many stations brand themselves as a city's or region's “NPR News Station.” They air local newscasts, feature stories, and programs, but these are generally in line with NPR's production style and editorial guidance, creating a consistent flow throughout the day. Sometimes the sound is so seamless that listeners may not even know their local station's call letters, or that the station is an independent entity and not a bureau or branch of NPR.

The value, and meaning, of this localization has changed as more listeners have moved to digital platforms. More than just taking listeners away from radio, podcasting (however unprofitable it may be) has made it easier than ever for listeners to bypass stations and listen to their favorite shows on demand, on whichever device and through whichever app they prefer. NPR doesn't offer the full “Morning Edition” or “All Things Considered” shows as podcasts, but it does turn some of their segments into podcasts — “Up First” in the morning and “Consider This” in the afternoon. Many other shows, like the ever-popular “Wait, Wait ... Don't Tell Me!”, are available as podcasts.

“We're all competing for time and people's atten-

tion,” says Will Dahlberg, general manager of WBHM in Alabama, which laid off four employees last year because of a budget shortfall. One reason for the shortfall was an increase in the fees the station pays to NPR, fees that give the station rights to air shows like “Morning Edition” and “All Things Considered” as well as others that listeners might be getting as podcasts. “The NPR brand helps us, and we pay a lot of money to be with it, but at the same time, it's a rob-Peter-to-pay-Paul situation,” Dahlberg adds.

The drop in FM's power and profitability has given new urgency to the need to build a version of the broadcast relationship between stations and the mother ship for the digital age. “A strong network of Member stations makes for a stronger NPR, and vice versa,” NPR's Director of Subscriptions Growth Leda Marritz said in a statement. NPR offers a content management system to member stations that allows them to share stories. Local reporting appears in the NPR app's audio feed just as it does on “Morning Edition” and “All Things Considered.”

Since 2021, NPR has offered a premium subscription for its podcasts, called NPR+. In exchange for a donation to their local station or to NPR, listeners get ad-free downloads and bonus episodes for shows like “Car Talk,” “Fresh Air,” and the NPR Politics Podcast.

“The goals of it are good. I think in many ways, NPR is late to the game in doing this,” Dahlberg says. He points out that podcasters had been asking for financial support long before 2021. And WBHM isn't able to offer its members NPR+ because the university that holds its license won't contract with Stripe, the payments-processor NPR uses. “It's a hell of a catch-22 for a lot of stations,” Dahlberg says. NPR says it's working with stations like WBHM to clear some of the red tape, and most NPR+ listeners give through their local station. In markets where a station is part of NPR+, all of the money a subscriber gives goes to their local station. In markets where stations can't (or don't) participate, half the money goes to NPR and half goes to a fund the mother ship gives back to stations. In addition, NPR gives local stations NPR+ listeners' contact information, so the stations can reach out and try to win some of their time or attention.

Just having some way for digital users to give to public radio is essential, given that “less than 1 percent of NPR's large digital audience currently donates,” according to Marritz.

Radio isn't dead yet, however. Early numbers showed an uptick in listening since July, a time span that included two assassination attempts on Donald Trump, the change in the Democratic ticket, both parties' conventions, and a newly energized, tightened presidential race. And in areas without reliable cellular data, or in times of disasters, radio can be an essential way of reaching people. After Hurricane Helene, Blue Ridge Public Radio in North Carolina broadcast emergency information in English and Spanish, for example.

But the last two years have made clear that, even in times of decline, stations can't take radio for granted. “We have to get a larger piece of a shrinking pie,”



WBHM General Manager Will Dahlberg says all NPR member stations are “competing for time and people's attention.”

Goldstein says. “We are trained to broadcast and reach broad audiences, but the way that people have developed relationships with media is a lot narrower now.” But the strategy for how to hold on to, grow, and perhaps inspire giving from this audience is, like everything in public media, a joint effort between stations and NPR with no simple or universal answer.

In an email, NPR Vice President of News Programming Eric Marripodi hypothesized that a new generation of NPR listeners may find their way to the FM dial once they settle into routines of life like a steady job, family, and commute. The plan outlined in Chapin's memo, he writes, “is about retaining and reengaging our regular listeners so they listen longer and more frequently.”

NPR's audience has traditionally skewed toward older, white, college-educated, affluent listeners. This audience is driving less — a New York Times survey found that white workers with college degrees are more likely to have remote or hybrid jobs — and they're already well-served by podcasts. “Podcasting is delivering infinite choices to that very same niche audience that NPR is used to catering to,” Montgomery says, and many podcasts have a stronger point of view that resonates with a listener's own perspective more than NPR's reporting. When listeners do drive, their cars increasingly connect to their phones instantly, meaning they can keep listening to the podcast or playlist they had on earlier, and may never need to turn to the radio. “You need to change their habits,” Montgomery says. “There's so many talented and amazing journalists at NPR, I'm sure that whatever they're going to put on is quality ... but you need to grab people back.”

What stations can offer that's different from podcasts is reporting from a listener's own community. "I think we should be leaning into our competitive advantage, which is local and audio," says a spokesperson for Public Media for All, a collective of public media employees who work with stations to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion within the organizations and to ensure diversity in coverage. And local audio doesn't just come through the radio — it can be in podcasts or a web stream. "This whole thing of 'how do we phase out FM slowly enough and the revenue from FM slowly enough that we can survive this digital transformation,' all of this is internal stuff that the audience doesn't care about," the spokesperson continues. "It doesn't matter what platform you're on. All that matters is, are you relevant to the audience?" Some recent projects PMFA highlights as audience-focused and innovative are a welcome guide that St. Louis Public Radio put together for new residents in the city, and "Where Y'all Really From," a podcast from Louisville Public Media about the experience of Kentuckians with Asian and Pacific Islander heritage.

Besides rethinking their audience-loyalty strategy, stations also need to refocus their fundraising plans. The pledge drive is, in many ways, a victim of its own success. For the last two decades, stations have encouraged sustained giving, in which a listener gives a set amount every month rather than a lump-sum contribution each year. As more members became sustainers (Goldstein says most stations average about half-and-half) the pledge drive became less effective; the people who were likely to give were already giving and didn't need a reminder to renew. "We have picked the low-hanging fruit, and now we have to get creative with using our air to fundraise, because we need a taller ladder," Goldstein says. The on-air messaging now has to both convince current donors to increase their monthly donations and appeal to people who either just started listening or who decided against giving during previous pledge drives. Attracting new donors — especially ones who

are younger and come from more diverse backgrounds than public radio's current audience — can sometimes seem like a battle against time, as older members retire (changing their commutes and incomes), drift to other media, or die. "As much as we are trying to engage younger listeners and donors, it's a lot more time and effort and at a slower pace than we are losing folks," Dahlberg says.

Reaching this new audience underscores the tension inherent in local and national differentiation. If listeners are just as happy with podcasts, Dahlberg is wondering what WBHM can offer that's distinct. Soon, WBHM will launch a second station on another frequency aimed at listeners who feel burned out by current events. "I'm calling it a non-news alternative. It may have a mix of, you know, storytelling and music," Dahlberg says. At first, the station will play a feed provided by PRX through its Remix service, essentially a nonstop playlist of independently produced radio stories.

On the main WBHM signal, listeners hear expanded regional news, something that isn't available from national podcasts or via podcast at all in areas where local news has receded. For several years, WBHM has been part of the Gulf States Newsroom, one of several regional collaborations between stations that get support from NPR and CPB, as well as grants from foundations and philanthropists. The stations share editorial resources and aim to provide public-service reporting about areas where local news is at risk of collapsing. "I would say they have done more to reach diverse communities and tell stories from areas in the Southeast than probably more stations have done in their entire existence," Dahlberg says. In addition to the Gulf States Newsroom, NPR has fostered regional hubs in Texas, California, the Midwest, and Mountain West, and is launching them in New England and Appalachia. "Collaborating regionally ... permits individual stations to focus on a more hyper-local strategy, serving their communities," says Bruce Auster, managing editor for collaborative journalism at NPR.

While the storm hit every public radio station, some have weathered it better than others, in part through building the kind of loyalty and wide base of revenue that every station is after. KUT in Austin, Texas, has avoided layoffs, even though listenership is down by about a third since 2020 and ratings for its music station, KUTX, are flat. Membership is strong, with 84 percent of its roughly 30,000 members donating as sustainers, giving an average of \$185 a year.

Digitally, traffic to the KUT site is up over 50 percent since 2018, drawing 350,000 unique visitors last year. General Manager Debbie Hiott attributes this to the work of 10 new journalists hired since 2019, and treating the site as distinct from the radio signal by updating stories more often, not tying every update to an equivalent story on the radio, and generally not moving "at a broadcast pace" by posting stories only in the morning and afternoon, the times when the station airs its most local news.

Even with this success, the station is facing a 3 percent financial deficit for the fiscal year. Hiott says re-



KUT News and KUTX General Manager Debbie Hiott at the stations' headquarters in Austin, Texas.

"We really believed, or at least I believed, that the runway we had with broadcast listenership was much longer than it actually was, and I was pretty pessimistic to begin with. If you'd asked [at the] beginning of 2020, I would have said five years. It turned out to be six months."

Kristen Muller, former chief content officer of LAist

serves and leaving some vacant positions unfilled should address the shortfall without the need to let any employees go. For future revenue, she's looking outside of membership and to major gifts and event sponsorship. The station hosts regular events, including a concert series in a local park with seven events a year (the series has hosted acts like Rosie Flores, promqueen, and the Grammy-winning Black Pumas) and a storytelling show built around a news podcast, ATXplained. Besides building audience, these performances make money. The concerts generate about \$200,000 a year in sponsorship. ATXplained brings in \$100,000 and is growing. It began in a 300-seat theater in 2018 and in 2023 sold out a 1,200-seat venue. The next event is in a theater that holds 1,600 people.

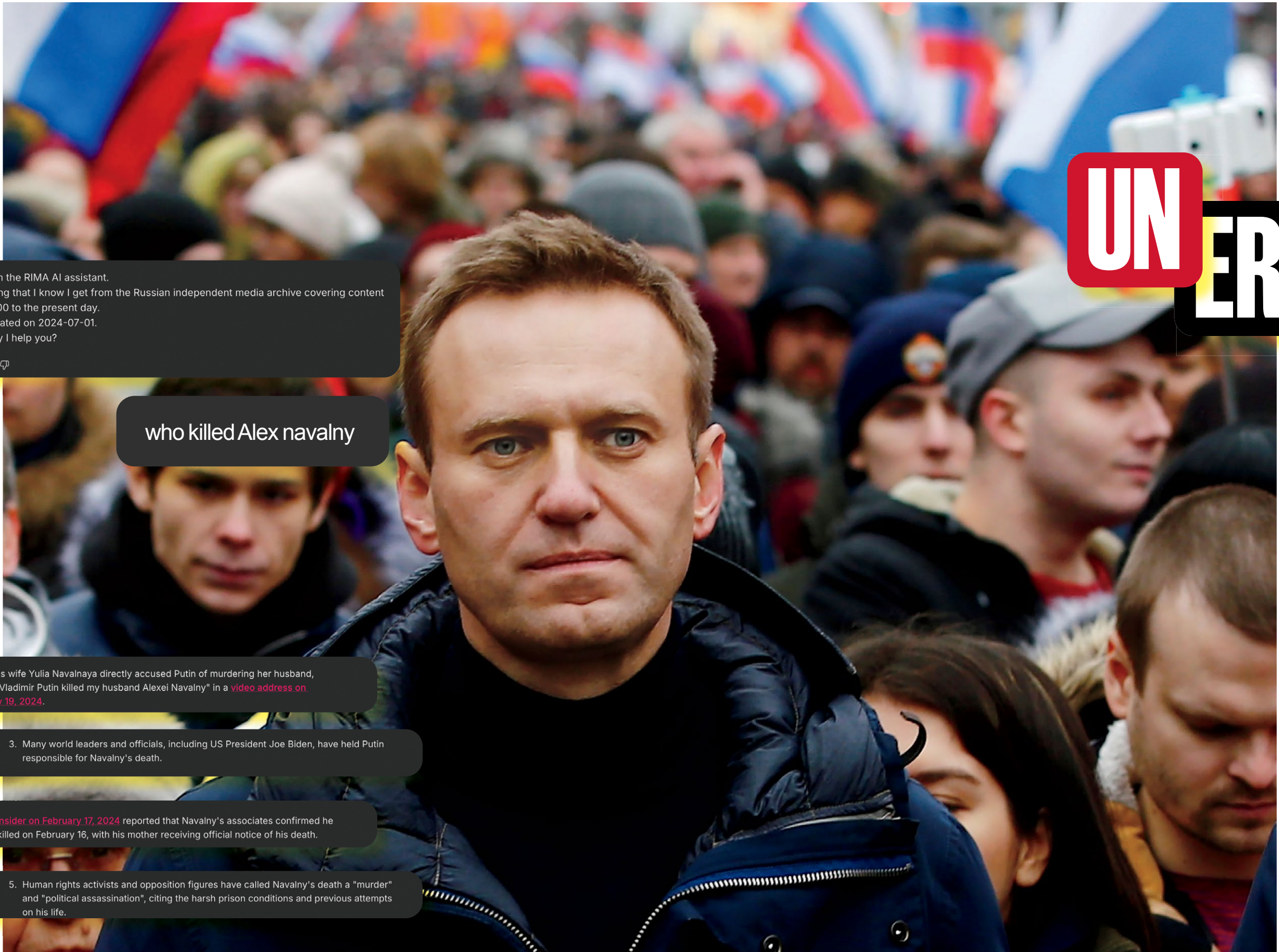
Membership has always been public radio's most important form of support. But as competition increases and as pledge drives weaken, hosting events like these can fill gaps caused by the decline in underwriting or the attrition of older members. "It's not going to be the \$1,500 underwriting buy from the local dry cleaner that's going to get us through," Goldstein says, adding that major gifts from donors and philanthropic grants are also becoming increasingly important. "One five-figure gift can replace an entire day of fundraising on the air." In late 2023, KUT secured \$1.5 million from two philanthropists who also

supported local schools, the symphony, and arts institutions. Hiott calls the gift "transformative," and essential to expanding and maintaining regional news coverage.

One thing Hiott, who previously worked in newspapers, doesn't want is to abandon the legacy platform too rapidly. "Newspapers pivoted, in a lot of cases, in a way that their core subscribers felt like, 'Man, I'm getting crap in the paper these days,'" she says. To that end, Hiott is dedicated to securing as much radio audience as possible and steering on-air listeners to digital offerings. This strategy includes putting segments from the podcast Black Austin Matters on-air. It also means putting on newscasts from KUT on KUTX, and inviting listeners who are exhausted by the news to take a break with the music station.

Every station has to figure out how to maintain its current audience and build a new one on-air, in person, and online. But the other lesson Hiott learned from her career in print is that there's no time to mourn the legacy medium. "What I saw on the newspaper side was a lot of panic at the levels where we should have been more strategic at times, and a lot of insular [thinking like], 'We're going with this solution, but we're not going to tell you how it works.' And so I think we have a much better chance of riding this out than, frankly, newspapers had." ■

GABRIEL C. PÉREZ/KUT NEWS



UNERASED

Hello! I'm the RIMA AI assistant. Everything that I know I get from the Russian independent media archive covering content from 2000 to the present day. Last updated on 2024-07-01. How may I help you?

📄 👍 🗨

who killed Alex navalny

2. Navalny's wife Yulia Navalnaya directly accused Putin of murdering her husband, stating "Vladimir Putin killed my husband Alexei Navalny" in a [video address on February 19, 2024](#).

3. Many world leaders and officials, including US President Joe Biden, have held Putin responsible for Navalny's death.

6. [The Insider on February 17, 2024](#) reported that Navalny's associates confirmed he was killed on February 16, with his mother receiving official notice of his death.

5. Human rights activists and opposition figures have called Navalny's death a "murder" and "political assassination", citing the harsh prison conditions and previous attempts on his life.

Vladimir Putin's government is trying to scrub critical journalism from the internet. The Russian Independent Media Archive is standing in its way.

BY ANN COOPER

Fresh from a reporting trip to Moscow, just days after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Masha Gessen took a seat at a board meeting of PEN America in New York City. A few nights earlier, Gessen had been in the Moscow studios of TV Rain, Russia's last independent TV channel, when the government blocked the channel's internet feed. Phone calls to the station warned of an imminent raid by security forces. Everyone in the studio, including Gessen, fled, leaving behind jackets, broadcast equipment, and personal computers. Most began searching for airline seats to Yerevan, Tbilisi, or other points outside of Russia; remaining in the country meant risking arrest because, as Gessen described in an article for The New Yorker, "the prosecutor's office had announced that it would start applying a dormant and arcane law that makes it possible to charge anyone with high treason for virtually any reason."

PHOTO: SEFA KARACAN/ANADOLU AGENCY VIA GETTY IMAGES; ILLUSTRATION: DAN ZEDEK

“WE THINK THAT THE INTERNET IS FOREVER, BUT IN FACT, THERE’S NOTHING EASIER THAN KILLING THE DIGITAL RECORD WHEN IT’S ONLY IN THE CLOUD.”

MASHA GESSEN

PREVIOUS PAGE: The late Russian opposition leader **Alexei Navalny** during a 2019 march in Moscow on the fourth anniversary of the death of fellow opposition leader **Boris Nemtsov**.

The image of those personal items left behind stuck with Gessen, who wondered what else had been abandoned in the rush to escape a new round of Kremlin repression. In particular, they wondered, where were the programming archives of TV Rain, one of the few survivors of President Vladimir Putin’s two decades of cracking down on his political opponents and other critics — including Russia’s talented, often muckraking, independent journalists? Putin’s government was already erasing history that didn’t fit its ideology. TV Rain journalists had been at odds with Putin for years, most recently denouncing the invasion of Ukraine. If their archives were not on secure servers, they might well “disappear” on orders from Russian authorities or be pulled offline for nonpayment of storage fees.

“We think that the internet is forever,” said Gessen, a Russian-born American journalist who has chronicled the long slide into totalitarianism under Putin. “But in fact, there’s nothing easier than killing the digital record when it’s only in the cloud, or in an unsafe cloud.”

All of that was very much on Gessen’s mind when they took a seat next to Peter Barbey at the PEN board meeting. Barbey, the former CEO of his family’s Pennsylvania media company and onetime publisher of *The Village Voice*, is also a longtime financial backer of PEN America’s Freedom to Write prize, which annually honors a writer persecuted for their work. “I sort of downloaded all of these impressions to [Barbey],” Gessen recalled. “And he said: ‘Let’s do it.’”

In that winter of 2022, “it” was a still-nascent notion that asked: How can we save the work of journalists from an authoritarian regime determined to erase history and replace it with Kremlin propaganda?

The answer to that question now exists as the Russian Independent Media Archive (RIMA), funded by, among others, Barbey and the Andrew Gagarin Trust, and developed by Gessen and several Russians in partnership with PEN America and Bard College. RIMA offers a digitized, open-access, easily searchable collection of 129 Russian media outlets so far, but several dozen more are likely to be added. Most are print or online text sites, though the collection also includes video investigations done by the late opposition leader Alexei Navalny’s Anti-Corruption Foundation and the popular video interviews and documentaries of Yury Dud, an anti-war YouTuber. The TV Rain archives that Gessen worried about are now stored by RIMA. Content from most sites goes back to the early 2000s or, in some cases, to the 1990s. Everything is accessible in both Russian and English, with constant updates in both languages using Google Translate.

Though many of the outlets continue to maintain their own archives, RIMA hosts all of them in one place, overseen by a team in a secure location.

Unlike most libraries, where archives are often stowed silently away, RIMA’s staff and partners proactively promote its use. Bard offers small grants to faculty who use RIMA in developing courses focused on authoritarian challenges to independent journalism, and there are stipends for graduate students who incorporate the archive’s material in their research. A weekly show on



TV Rain, now operating in exile, revisits recent Russian history with the help of stories stored in the archive. And some 20 Russian tech developers, living in exile around the globe, work with RIMA co-founder and operational director Serob Khachatryan on digital tools to enhance RIMA’s accessibility and usefulness.

One such tool is a bespoke chatbot. When asked “How did Alexei Navalny die?” it displays stories from the RIMA archive challenging the official line that Russia’s most popular opposition politician died of a sudden illness in an Arctic prison in February 2024. The chatbot’s conclusion: “[T]here is widespread skepticism and belief that his death was a politically motivated murder.”

But perhaps the project’s most significant innovation, one with potential global impact, is still to come. RIMA’s tech architects have built it to be a template. It’s “a tool that can be given to any other community of jour-

nalists who are facing censorship,” said historian and journalist Ilia Venyavkin, another RIMA co-founder. A first project, funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development, is creating a website to preserve the nearly three decades of work by the Guatemalan newspaper *El Periódico*. The paper was forced to close after founder and editor José Rubén Zamora was arrested in 2022 and convicted of what press freedom advocates described as trumped-up financial crimes, designed as punishment for the paper’s years of hard-hitting reporting on government corruption. Venyavkin said the website will be capable of preserving *El Periódico* and other endangered media in Central America. Though designed by RIMA, management of it would ultimately be transferred to the Zamora family or a journalists’ group in the region.

Creating more such sites for vulnerable journalism in other countries or regions would require a major new

funding campaign. But there is a growing global need for something like the RIMA template, said Jonathan Becker, executive vice president of Bard College. “Unfortunately, with this growth of authoritarianism, [Russia] is not the only place where you’ll need to preserve independent media in a viable way,” said Becker, who oversaw Bard’s 25-year partnership with a university in St. Petersburg, Russia, until that program fell victim in 2021 to a Kremlin crackdown on foreign entities.

PEN America, where Gessen and Barbey had that early conversation, has long defended individual writers and, more broadly, free expression around the world. Barbey describes RIMA as a necessary internet-era expansion of the PEN mission. Faith in the permanence of digital storage, particularly in authoritarian countries, “is frankly fool-

TV Rain staffers fled their studio after hearing rumors that special forces would storm the building. Since then, the channel was shut down within Russia, and its journalists have gone into exile, where they resumed broadcasting on the internet.

NANNA HEITMANN/THE NEW YORKER VIA MAGNUM

**“ALL THE
TOTALITARIAN
REGIMES,
THEY HAVE
ONE THING
IN COMMON.
THEY TRY TO
HIDE FACTS.”**
ANNA NEMZER

ish,” he said in a recent interview. “If you’re protecting writers and don’t protect what they write, what are you really accomplishing?”

There’s little question that what independent journalists wrote or broadcast in Russia over the past quarter-century — and what many now produce in exile — is in need of protection. False narratives Putin has used to justify the invasion of Ukraine are enshrined in new textbooks, and Russian law enforcement has gone after thousands who dared speak up against the war, including journalists. Years before the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the Putin-era censorship office, Roskomnadzor, routinely ordered news sites to purge stories, many of them documenting high-level corruption or other official malfeasance. After the invasion, the censorship office blocked access in Russia to independent media sites. Not satisfied with controlling what Russians could read about the war, Roskomnadzor stepped up its efforts, demanding that news sites in Kazakhstan and other former Soviet republics (now sovereign nations) remove articles critical of the invasion — a tactic first reported by Mediazona, an independent Russian news outlet.

“All the dictatorships, all the totalitarian regimes, they have one thing in common,” RIMA co-founder Anna Nemzer, a TV Rain presenter and documentary filmmaker, said in an interview. “They try to hide facts. They try to manipulate the facts. They try to play with history, to falsify.”

Nemzer stumbled on one glaring example in early 2024 while researching for the weekly video program produced by RIMA and TV Rain. The program explores recent Russian history, like the story of Sergei Magnitsky, a lawyer and anti-corruption whistleblower, whose 2009 death in a Russian prison became an international human rights scandal.

“I knew there was an article in Vedomosti newspaper, where the authors actually named all the names of people responsible for his death,” Nemzer said. But when she searched the Vedomosti site, she got a 404 error message and the suggestion that she check her link.

Certain there was no error, Nemzer turned to the Wayback Machine, a tool that allows users to search deleted material and older versions of websites saved by the nonprofit Internet Archive. It’s an extremely useful tool, but its 900 billion web pages and counting, scraped from more than 350 million websites, can be daunting for novice users. Nemzer’s Wayback search eventually turned up the original 2009 Vedomosti story. It also found other versions of the article, which apparently was altered several times over the years, until “they ended up just deleting the article,” said Nemzer.

Exactly who deleted it is unknown. Why it was deleted is easy to guess, since the article pointed fingers at specific prosecutors and prison officials.

Vedomosti — founded in 1999 by The Wall Street Journal, the Financial Times, and Independent Media, publisher of the English-language Moscow Times — was a well-respected, independent-minded business paper in the early years of Putin’s tenure. It was the kind of paper not afraid to run a detailed account of the legal and physical persecution of Magnitsky that led to his

death at age 37. But after a law was passed in 2014 to limit foreign ownership of media, Vedomosti’s Western investors left, and the door was opened to a series of new Russian owners. Staff changed, editorial content grew decidedly more Kremlin-friendly, and the hard-hitting Magnitsky article eventually disappeared, perhaps at official request, or possibly as a gesture of loyalty to Russian leaders embarrassed by its revelations.

Also unknown, of course, is how many other articles may have been removed from Vedomosti and other sites. To begin to assess that, RIMA asked students at the University of Arizona — some in Russian studies, some in the school’s human rights program — to do some internet sleuthing, looking for news stories about articles censored from Russian media. The students came up with several dozen examples of purged content: stories about Navalny or his work exposing official corruption, articles announcing plans for public protests, and some pieces that focused on the war in Ukraine.

Each of the articles, though deleted from their original sites, was recovered on the Wayback Machine. One of the recovered stories is a December 2022 article on how to avoid Russia’s military draft, published by Rezonans, a site based in the city of Vladimir, a couple of hours east of Moscow. If tips like “avoid police patrols” and “don’t open the door to uninvited guests” fail, the article advised draftees to surrender: “This is the only way to stay alive and not become a murderer.” Blocked in Russia, Rezonans publishes new material on Telegram, using the hashtag #НетВойне (No to War).

Like Vedomosti, many of the 129 news outlets whose work is currently archived by RIMA were founded in the 1990s, the heyday of independent media in Russia. But independence began to erode almost from the moment Putin took office in 2000. Within weeks, he launched what became a long-range, concerted effort to bring Russian media under Kremlin influence or direct Kremlin control.

A common technique was to apply Kremlin pressure on an outlet — by going after the owner for tax evasion, for example — to pave the way for a takeover. The new owner might be a state-controlled company, such as Gazprom, Russia’s natural gas monopoly, or a rich oligarch loyal to Putin.

New owners brought editorial change, sometimes gradually, sometimes overnight. One of the most dramatic shifts came on March 12, 2014, when the Kremlin-loyal owner of popular news site Lenta.ru fired respected editor Galina Timchenko. Timchenko was ousted after Lenta ran an interview with a leader of Ukraine’s ultra-nationalist Right Sector, at a time when Russia was nearing completion of its campaign to annex the Ukrainian territory of Crimea. Giving a platform to any critic of the Crimea takeover could leave a media outlet vulnerable to Kremlin wrath.

When it lost Timchenko and the many staffers who walked out with her, Lenta was no longer a source for independent reporting on Russia. But its work from the independent period is accessible through RIMA, up to March 10, 2014, two days before Timchenko was fired. The stories



Masha Gessen speaks at the 2019 Leipzig Book Fair in Germany. Gessen is a co-founder of the Russian Independent Media Archive, which aims to preserve the work of the independent Russian press.

are not actually stored in the RIMA archive, though, since RIMA has no legal contract with the current owners of Lenta, Vedomosti, or other formerly independent outlets now in the Kremlin’s sphere. Instead, each story listing from 1997 to March 2024 has two links. One leads to the Lenta site, where the original story may or may not exist intact. The other goes to the Wayback Machine where the original text is preserved.

Other sites that have maintained their independence have agreements with RIMA allowing the archive to store all of their work, past and future. They include Meduza, the Latvia-based site that Timchenko and her colleagues founded after they left Lenta. Meduza was early to explore how to cover Russia from exile; now, virtually everyone in the independent media community works in exile. Their sites are blocked in Russia, accessible only via VPN, which is also the only way Russians can now access RIMA.

For those outside of Russia, it’s possible to access the archives of Meduza, Mediazona, Proekt, iStories, The Bell, and other well-established independent newsrooms through their own websites. But since fleeing Russia, all are struggling to replace lost revenues from advertising and their Russian readership. “The archives are not their first priority, because they just need to focus on the surviving question,” said Nemzer. “We say we’ll deal with that, and they say, ‘Thank you.’”

Though RIMA is technically based at Bard College in upstate New York, you can’t pay a physical visit to the archive, the way you would to, say, the New York Public Library’s holdings of New York Times records. Everything is digitized, including some publications that were handed to RIMA in print form.

“They say, ‘I’ll send you 10 boxes of our magazine,’” said co-founder Venyavkin. One journalist who fled

Russia in 2022 brought with him about a dozen years’ worth of print copies of Afisha, a magazine about arts and culture that also wrote about Russia’s LGBTQ community before such coverage was essentially outlawed. RIMA is digitizing those copies for inclusion in the online archive later this year.

“One of the tiny reasons for our existence is just to give people the opportunity to see that the norms can be completely different” from today’s highly restricted Russia, said Venyavkin. In the 1990s, and even in the early 2000s before the Kremlin stifled nearly all independent voices, it was possible to report “normally” on Navalny, the LGBTQ community, or Josef Stalin’s tyrannical rule, all topics now subject to censorship. By reading the archives, “you can see that it was okay to talk about that in an open way,” Venyavkin added, and that the people talking and writing openly were “not in the USA, or in Europe, or anywhere [else]. It was like people next door.”

Venyavkin left Russia in 2022 and was named a “foreign agent” the following year, a designation used by Russia to discredit many independent journalists. He, Nemzer, and Khachatryan all live in exile, with a Bard affiliation that provides their visas, even though under Russian law it’s a crime to associate with the “undesirable” school.

Gessen, who now writes for The New York Times, has been a target of even greater Kremlin wrath. In 2024, Gessen was sentenced in absentia to eight years in prison for comments made in 2022 about Russian military atrocities.

Gessen describes RIMA as a project for the future. “It’s based on the assumption that nothing is forever, including Putinism,” they said, and on the belief that someday there will be “a chance at a redo.” Who will have that chance? “Somebody, some generation,” said Gessen. “Probably not mine.” ■

Dear America

Advice from areas of the world where press freedom is under attack

BY ANN MARIE LIPINSKI

International journalists are hearing echoes. From countries around the world that have witnessed the rise of autocratic and populist leaders, they are watching the U.S. and warning of a characteristic of wounded democracies everywhere: an endangered free press.

When Donald Trump sued CBS News for \$10 billion over its editing of a Kamala Harris interview, some viewed it as just another tantrum. When he threatened to revoke broadcast licenses for critical coverage, we were told it was beyond a president's power. And when the president-elect's insults escalated from cries of "fake news" to violent provocations, his defenders said not to take him literally.



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Rioters smash AP journalists' equipment outside the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, in Washington, D.C.

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But each of these developments and others are warning signs to those journalists who saw the improbable become reality in their countries as democratic norms were trampled.

“American colleagues, prepare for the worst,” writes Glenda Gloria, editor of Rappler, a news site in the Philippines whose staff endured years of personal attack and legal torment from the Rodrigo Duterte administration. “If it doesn’t happen, you’ll be happy to be proven wrong. If it happens, it could happen fast.”

International journalists have long come to the U.S. and the Nieman Foundation seeking respite and a path out of repressive conditions for journalism. With humility, we asked some of these journalists and others in weakened democracies to tell us how they now view conditions in the U.S. and what advice they would offer their American colleagues. Some work in countries whose authoritarian leaders Trump has praised, including Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The responses, collected here, serve not as predictions but as cautionary tales and a plea to take heed. It is “death-by-a-thousand-cuts of press freedom that I would advise my American journalist colleagues to watch out for,” writes Turkish journalist Gülsin Harman.

Trump’s lawsuit against CBS may seem frivolous and doomed, but government leaders elsewhere know they are a costly and debilitating burden to news organizations, some of which have shut down under the weight of the expense. Trump’s evolving proclamations about the press have included threats to jail reporters who won’t identify confidential sources. And at a Pennsylvania rally during the final days of the presidential campaign, he gestured toward the press pen and said, “To get me, somebody would have to shoot through the fake news. And I don’t mind that so much.” These sound familiar alarms to journalists whose governments routinely imprison reporters and tolerate, or commit, violence against them with impunity.

“Dear American colleagues, do not have any illusions,” writes Bartosz Wielński, deputy editor of Poland’s Gazeta Wyborcza. “If an autocrat or dictator announces something, sooner or later they will act on it.”

Six years ago, I visited Gazeta Wyborcza, a newspaper birthed during the historic anti-authoritarian Solidarity movement. Journalists there despaired. The paper was suffering the attacks of the newly elected Law and Justice party, worn down by lawsuits and government pressure on its advertisers and vendors. Its financial health, like the country’s hard-won democracy, was deteriorating, conditions that would endure until new elections.

I wrote about them at the time, not imagining the lessons of their experience would come back as counsel to my own country.

“It was easier ... to stand up to authoritarian authorities knowing we were supported by friends abroad,” writes Wielński. “Now, we are here to support you.”

Ann Marie Lipinski, NF '90, is the curator of The Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard.

HUNGARY

Our only source of power is our audience

BY ANDRÁS PETHÓ

Let me start with the bad news. Yes, you should brace yourself for the worst. History has taught us that even centuries-old institutions can crumble under the weight of political forces that are ruthless and have sufficient resources to carry out their plans. Just ask the churches, universities, businesses, and civil society organizations how well they did under communist dictatorships in Eastern Europe after World War II.

Hungary, where I run the investigative reporting nonprofit Direkt36, is still a much freer place now than it was during those dark times. But if the 14-year (and still counting) rule of Viktor Orbán can provide any guidance on what is waiting for independent journalists under Donald Trump’s second term, you can expect

increasingly aggressive propaganda campaigns against you, attacks on your business operations, and maybe even some spying on you and your sources.

So, arm yourselves with the best lawyers who can protect you against politically motivated legal attacks and can challenge unjust regulations. Increase your physical and digital security. Maybe even team up with your competitors to make a case to the people that independent, fact-based journalism is a public service.

You should also realize that what you are facing now is not a uniquely American problem. Many of your colleagues around the world have been struggling with these challenges for years. Reach out to them and ask them about their experience. Maybe they have useful advice on what to do and what not to do, the latter of which can be equally important.

This brings us to the good news. In Hungary we have gone through all the challenges I mentioned (propaganda, business pressures, surveillance), and we’re still alive.

My colleagues and I launched Direkt36 nearly 10 years ago, after we had to leave our previous workplace, one of Hungary’s most popular digital news sites, when it came under pressure from the government.

The first few years were especially hard, when we had to figure out the business side of our operations and establish ourselves as a new outlet. But now we have an organization that has been growing steadily, attracting young talent, and producing stories that reach hundreds

Rappler CEO Maria Ressa, second from right, speaks with Managing Editor Glenda Gloria, as they huddle with their lawyers after Ressa’s arrest on cyberlibel charges, just one of the baseless cases brought against her in an effort to stifle Rappler’s reporting.

of thousands (a big number in Hungary) and often put the government on the defensive.

Whatever resilience we have is due mainly to two reasons. Since advertisers and investors often have political agendas, we rely on a membership program as our main source of revenue. And we are an active member of the growing international investigative journalism community to which we can always turn for help, whether it is about pursuing a cross-border story or asking for technological or legal assistance.

We are not alone. When another popular news site, Index, was taken over by pro-government forces four years ago, its whole staff resigned and set up another outlet, Telex, which has quickly become one of the most influential news sources in the country (full disclosure: they are our publishing partners).

Another example is Partizán, an outlet that started as a YouTube channel just a few years ago. Now, it practically functions as the public service broadcaster of Hungary, streaming a mix of serious political coverage and entertainment to audiences whose size rivals that of traditional television channels. (The official public broadcaster has been turned into a mouthpiece of the government.)

If there has been one lesson during this journey, it is that nothing really matters other than the audience. I know, you’ve heard this a million times already. But we all should continue to think about it deeply. The model of college-educated journalists writing news for a college-educated audience clearly doesn’t work as a business model (at least not for everyone). Neither does it fulfill the role journalism should play in a democracy.

Our only source of power is our audience. The bigger and more diverse it is, the bigger our defense against any autocrat who wants to crush us.

András Pethó, NF '20, is co-founder and executive director of Direkt36, an investigative journalism center in Hungary.

PHILIPPINES

Yield an inch to a tyrant, and he will want more

BY GLENDA M. GLORIA

After the foul-mouthed mayor from southern Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte, won a landslide victory in the 2016 presidential election, not a few journalists dismissed forecasts of a coming Duterte storm. He could not possibly nationalize the death squad that he deployed against petty criminals in Davao City, they declared. He’s all drama but harmless, said reporters who have covered him for ages.

**In the face of
tyranny and
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there should be
no line between
journalism and
activism, only
a bridge.**

Duterte himself had warned Filipinos that they might not like what they saw if he won. In an interview with Rappler CEO Maria Ressa seven months before the election, he said: “When I said I’ll stop criminality, I’ll stop criminality. If I have to kill you, I’ll kill you. Personally.”

The Duterte regime did not only kill tens of thousands of Filipinos from 2016 to 2022, for which the ex-president is being investigated by the International Criminal Court. It also tried to kill newsrooms and succeeded in shutting down the country’s biggest and most powerful broadcasting network, ABS-CBN.

So, dear American colleagues, prepare for the worst. Drill it into your everyday operations. If it doesn’t happen, you’ll be happy to have been proven wrong. If it does happen, it could happen fast — like a volley of punches meant to mess with your heads before the final blow.

We’ve learned hard lessons from the Duterte years, four of which, I believe, are relevant no matter where or who you are.

■ **Yield not an inch.** Fear for the business and the future makes “compromise” an attractive option to media owners and shareholders. How about a back-channel to government officials to reassure them we’re not the enemy, some say? Get real: what could an autocrat want that a self-respecting independent newsroom could give? Nothing. Don’t yield an inch, for he will want more.

■ **Keep it going.** In our part of the world, big companies pulled ads, state prosecutors charged journalists and media owners in court, and tech-enabled influencers demonized us and funneled readers to propaganda channels. Where leaders see media shutdown as a messy option, they can choose a war of attrition. Stock up. Raise a legal and emergency fund outside your operations budget. Develop a revenue stream beyond the autocrat’s reach. And then keep going.

■ **Know your first line of defense.** Journalists will not run away from a good fight, but they need to know the principles behind a battle plan. Walk them through the worst-case scenarios, raise the likelihood of belt-tightening and persistent attacks, tell them that they can quit and won’t be judged. Brief them on dangers to their security, and equip them with basic safety skills. Journalists are the fiercest, most tenacious species on earth. They will stay. And they will write the most compelling stories. Published last year, “Some People Need Killing,” by former Rappler investigative reporter Patricia Evangelista, has been read and praised by thousands of readers around the world, including Filipinos who had applauded Duterte’s bloody drug war.

■ **Hold the line with your communities.** Your loyal readers have got your back, but they appreciate you doing more than just writing stories for them. Show up — at press freedom rallies, at forums on journalism and democracy, in conversations that try to make sense of what’s happening around you. In the face of tyranny and the digital manipulation of societies, there should be no line between journalism and activism, only a bridge. It’s called citizenship.

Whether in the Philippines or in Russia, crisis has

brought out the best in journalism and in newsrooms. The 2021 Nobel Peace Prize acknowledged this. You seem to be even better-positioned to hold the line and turn Trump 2.0 into an opportunity.

Glenda M. Gloria, NF ’18, is co-founder and executive editor of the award-winning Philippines-based independent news site Rappler.

PERU

**Prompt action
to prevent early
erosion of press
freedom will be
crucial**

BY GUSTAVO GORRITI

A fitting analogy for the day-after dread that some felt after Donald Trump’s election to a second term might be the single-sentence short story by Latin American writer Augusto Monterroso: “When he woke, the dinosaur was still there.”

Trump had already denounced the press as the “enemy of the people” during his first term as president. Now, for his new term, he has promised to exact revenge on independent journalists and media. Some cowed publishers offered a preview, before the election, of what can be expected. Others will join in trying to find the best way to bend and kiss the ring.

Those of us who live and work in countries with precarious democracies have lived, or continue to live, through the kind of travails American journalists might face if an unchecked Trump has his way. Those challenges could include the following:

■ Investigative, or just in-depth journalism, will be targeted and countered with disinformation. There is nothing new about disinformation — the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century mastered it — but disinformation in the digital era can be massive. Lies upon lies can be published and spread by the thousands every day. To counter them, journalists must bring factual truth to light through reporting, double-checking and corroborating everything. It is an unequal fight in which only the more potent journalistic investigations will have a chance of prevailing by cutting through the torrents of lies.

■ Journalists will be smeared, defamed, and harassed while often sued at the same time in corrupt or cowed courts. Hired mobs will beleaguer them at their offic-



ALESSANDRO CINQUE/REUTERS

es and homes. Some accusations will be so insistently repeated from different sides that a number of people will end up believing them. Others will avoid meeting, or even being seen with, journalists, simply to not risk becoming a collateral target.

■ Intense defamation and smear campaigns against journalists risk paving the way for physical attacks. That was very much the case before the 2006 killing of Anna Politkovskaya in Russia and the 2017 murder in Malta of investigative reporter Daphne Caruana Galizia, who exposed government corruption. Other notoriously intense smear campaigns, like the one that targeted Maria Ressa in the Philippines, were countered by energetic campaigns of international solidarity, which probably prevented physical attacks but not all the other forms of harassment.

■ This means that the journalistic quest for truth will require navigating swamps of lies, falsehoods, trumped-up legal accusations, and the danger of physical attack. The journalistic process, especially investigative journalism, must therefore change. When planning an investigation, it will be necessary to simultaneously plan how to defend that investigation, as well as the journalists

Some journalists covering anti-government protests in Lima, Peru, in January 2023 were violently attacked by demonstrators.

conducting it. This is a complex endeavor, with many pitfalls along the way — part of a difficult, often unrewarding daily life.

This is a description of the reality faced by committed, stubborn journalists in several places around the world. Is it the certain future awaiting American journalism under Trump? Hope not. Needn’t be.

Prompt, energetic action to prevent early erosion of press freedom will be crucial. Journalism and defense of journalism should be integrated from the outset through all relevant avenues, particularly legal ones. A degree of activism, however alien to journalism in normal times of constitutional government, will be necessary.

Be strong-willed, eloquent, determined to expose truths with fearless energy, and great numbers of freedom-loving Americans will rally behind you. That is your great advantage. Throughout their history, Americans faced other dinosaurs — and prevailed. Do it again, only better. The world needs it.

Gustavo Gorriti, NF ’86, is the founder and director of IDL-Reporteros, a digital, nonprofit investigative publication in Peru.

Despotic regimes can birth great journalism

BY MANASSEH AZURE AWUNI

On Oct. 28, 2024, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced a policy to “restrict U.S. visas for any individual responsible for undermining democracy in Ghana.” The announcement came in advance of Ghana’s presidential and parliamentary elections, slated for Dec. 7.

I supported that policy against those who undermine democracy — including freedom of the press, one of democracy’s cardinal tenets — in Ghana. But a week after it was unveiled, Americans went to the polls and elected Donald Trump. His victory is a victory for impunity and sends the wrong signals to countries such as mine.

Before 2017, I practiced journalism in Ghana without fear. A new government then poisoned the media space with physical assault, arbitrary arrests, prosecutions, and murder. The perpetrators, mainly politicians and state security officials, went unpunished. I went into exile twice, drove with armed police escorts, and was compelled to take a break to preserve my mental health. And I was among the lucky journalists.

In the summer of 2018, Kennedy Ohene Agyapong, a ranking member of parliament, put a photograph of undercover investigative journalist Ahmed Hussein-Suale on a national TV station Agyapong owns, urging people to attack the reporter.

Not long after, two gunmen shot and killed Hussein-Suale near his home. Nobody has been arrested or prosecuted for the slaying. Later, when Agyapong placed second in the presidential primaries of the governing party in 2023, some of his followers referred to him as Ghana’s Donald Trump. That’s how America’s bad example can be emulated elsewhere.

You do not light a lamp at night to identify a person you know well, a Ghanaian proverb goes. Americans, especially journalists, already know Trump, and can expect another tumultuous journey ahead. In these hard times, journalists can win if they proactively counter the new Trump administration’s anticipated playbook.

The administration will put its jackhammer into the cracks that developed in media organizations such as the Los Angeles Times and The Washington Post in the weeks before the 2024 election, when both newspapers shocked readers by reversing their

Accountability journalism is much harder in harsh conditions, but there’s no better time to marshal such forces.

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endorsement policies at the last minute and declining to endorse Kamala Harris, resulting in internal strife. As has happened in Ghana, politicians and Trump supporters will no doubt target specific journalists and media organizations for retribution and persecution. Journalists should not rule out a rise in attacks, including physical harm.

America’s media must, however, be careful to refuse to rise to some of Trump’s bait. Don’t relinquish your agenda-setting power to Trump. Cover him, but don’t allow him to mislead you with his unending antics and logorrhea. Be alive to your supreme responsibility to hold Trump and his administration accountable, and don’t forget the other stories that matter.

Accountability journalism is much harder in harsh conditions, but there’s no better time to marshal such forces than when a man seemingly immune to scandal and averse to accountability oversees the United States. Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty, but journalists must go beyond vigilance. They must aggressively push back against the boulders of oppression.

If tough times are noted for producing tough people, despotic regimes can birth great journalism.

Manasseh Azure Awuni, NF '24, is a Ghanaian investigative journalist and author.

Stay strong, mentally and physically, for the fight ahead

BY VIDYA KRISHNAN

After 10 years of reporting in Narendra Modi’s India, Indian journalists know a thing or two about the kind of journalism that is done in faltering democracies. As Donald Trump’s “revenge tour” gets underway, all of it feels familiar to me watching from India. You are in for a fierce competition between sensationalists and propagandists, with fact-based, independent, clear-eyed journalism relegated to the sidelines.

When Modi came to power, announcing his hostility

Police stand outside the gates of BBC offices in New Delhi, which were raided by tax officials after Indian authorities banned a documentary critical of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

toward journalists back in 2014, it began with a handful of editors quitting or succumbing to pressure, with well-investigated stories being canceled, and with a rise in vigilantism against reporters. Press conferences became rare.

Today, we are used to newsrooms being raided and access to funding blocked. We are used to being called “presstitutes” and “anti-national” by Cabinet ministers, simply for doing our jobs. We are used to rape threats and death threats as reward for investigations done well. The precious little resources freelancers compete for have entirely dried up. All this has happened in front of our eyes over the last decade.

Then there is the question of prison — something that used to be a faraway concept, but that many of us are now confronting every day. The threat of imprisonment was an event that until a few years ago was as unimaginable as one’s own death — a reality that existed without having to be faced. Today, most of us journalists have lawyers who have been instructed on what’s to be done if or when the day comes.

On Oct. 3, 2023, for example, police in India’s capital, New Delhi, carried out early-morning raids at the homes of 46 journalists. Authorities seized their laptops and mobile phones, which was alarming in and of itself. But Modi’s administration — not one to take dissent lightly — also charged the journalists and the left-leaning online portal NewsClick under an antiterrorism law known as the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act. The editor and founder of the site, Prabir Purkayastha, was arrested on allegations that the portal had received Chinese funds and pursued an “anti-India agenda.” It would take almost eight months for the lawyers — who had to go all the way to the Supreme Court — to prove the arrest was illegal and get him released on bail.

It is incidents like this that contribute to India now being ranked 161st out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index maintained by Reporters Without Borders, having fallen more than 20 places since Modi became prime minister.

As things go from alarming to unendurable, my role as a journalist is to repeat what those before me have repeated under these circumstances: continue the work of documenting a version of events that centers the experiences of those with the least power. All our work before this time feels like it was just practice — preparing us to report on hostile governments, to piece together information as it grows increasingly difficult to get people on the record, and to do it all while being targeted for our reporting.

So, to my American colleagues in the press I say: There are many things you can do to prepare. Be meticulous, assuming that everything you report will end up in court. Practice digital hygiene — use VPNs and encrypted software. Memorize your emergency contacts and have an emergency protocol in place. And start a legal fund.

But I also have some advice that is not entirely about journalism: take up a sport, start running, or do yoga — because we all need a sound mind and a healthy body if we are to outlast our oppressors.

Vidya Krishnan, NF '21, is an investigative journalist and author based in India.

Journalists must actively defend democracy, and their weapon is the truth

BY BARTOSZ T. WIELIŃSKI

Dear American colleagues, do not have any illusions. If an autocrat or dictator announces something, sooner or later they will act on it. When the authoritarian Law and Justice party took power in Poland in the fall of 2015, we allowed ourselves to hope that things would not be as bad as expected. But it turned out to be worse than we thought, and within months, we found ourselves fighting for survival. So, prepare for the worst.

The Polish experience shows that, to dismantle independent media, it is not necessary to arrest journalists. The state can drive media outlets to financial ruin through pressure on advertisers, flood newsrooms with frivolous lawsuits to paralyze them, and restrict journalists' ability to gather information. On top of that, by spreading lies through social and traditional media, it can undermine their credibility. Such was our battle against Goliath that we waged in Poland for eight years — and we won.

What would I advise my American friends?

■ **Build communities** around your newspapers, radio and TV stations, or online platforms. The people who read or listen to you — and often pay for that — are your allies. They trust you, you matter to them, and they will stand up for you. You need to open up to them, engage with them directly, and foster a relationship. Social media posts alone are not enough.

■ **Stop being neutral and detached.** It may be comfortable for a journalist to sit on the sidelines, aiming for objectivity by saying, “This side claims this, but that side claims that.” However, this approach does not work when an authoritarian government strikes at the foundations of democracy. Journalists must actively defend democracy, and their weapon is the truth.

■ **Be clear and straightforward.** In difficult times, you need to speak plainly. Call things as they are — label a liar a liar, not a “speaker of untruths”; call a bad law bad, not merely “controversial.” Stay focused on what matters. Internet traffic experts will tell you that you are publishing too many grim stories and urge you to

A protester wearing a glove in Poland's national colors makes a victory gesture at a December 2021 rally in Krakow in support of press freedom.

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mix in lifestyle or relationship content. They will suggest focusing on young readers or listeners, emphasizing that they are less interested in hard politics. They will say a pop star on the cover will sell better than a serious politician. Do not let them set the agenda. It is true, you cannot live by politics alone, but politics — hard and brutal as they may be — will decide your future.

■ **Protect your journalists.** They are your most valuable resource. Shield them from accountants who may call for layoffs in a crisis and from government-fueled troll farms. Support their psychological well-being, respond decisively when they receive threats, and pursue legal action against those who harass them, even if they are influential figures.

■ **Do not be afraid to ask for support.** Those in power will accuse you of being traitors for bad-mouthing your country to outsiders. But the solidarity of journalists in the democratic world is powerful. It was easier for the editors of *Gazeta Wyborcza* to stand up to an authoritarian government knowing we had the support of friends abroad. Now, we are here to support you.

*Bartosz T. Wieliński is the deputy editor in chief of Polish daily *Gazeta Wyborcza*.*

BEATA ZAWRZEL/INURPHOTO VIA GETTY

ECUADOR

Now more than ever, strength lies in unity

BY MÓNICA ALMEIDA

I could not have imagined having to write this kind of advice to my U.S. colleagues. My only hope is that Ecuador's painful experience will help you face an uncertain future.

Almost immediately upon taking power in 2007, President Rafael Correa and his so-called Citizen Revolution started to accuse journalists of being crooked, unpatriotic, and “ink hitmen.” Ecuador's constitution was dismantled and a new one created, paving the way for a Communication Act with count-

less restrictions on our profession. We even had our own modern inquisitor, like in medieval times — the Superintendent of Communication — who could impose sanctions and fines without judicial oversight, a system similar to the regulations passed by Viktor Orbán's party in Hungary.

Correa also sued the country's largest newspaper, *El Universo*, for libel, demanding \$80 million in damages and calling for prison terms for the three owners and the opinion editor. The courts granted Correa \$40 million and the prison sentences, but after international pressure, the owners and editor were pardoned and did not have to pay or serve time. Although Correa's presidency ended in 2017 — and he can't return to the country because of a bribery-related conviction — his party remains powerful.

Based on our experience in Ecuador, I'd like to offer a few suggestions for helping to protect journalism and journalists:

■ **Know your rights.** Understand America's Constitution and legal protections regarding freedom of speech and freedom of the press, as well as libel and slander laws. Refresh your knowledge of international protections, such as the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

■ **Find your pack.** Now more than ever, strength lies in unity. Seek out committees or journalist associations committed to defending the profession and join them without delay.

■ **Seek allies.** Look beyond journalism and media for allies. Civil society is prepared to join the fight, so find common ground and unite.

■ **Recognize the authoritarian playbook.** Authoritarianism uses legal changes to create more rules and requirements for journalists and media companies to follow and uses them to curtail press freedom.

■ **Control the narrative.** Journalists serve the public, not the powerful or any political party. Do not let them tell all those lies about journalism.

■ **Stay professional under provocation.** Reporters should not step into the ring to spar with politicians. Remain calm, do your best work, and avoid provocations or insults.

■ **Safeguard against surveillance.** Journalists are often targeted with stigmatization, insults, and increased surveillance. It's essential to take security precautions.

■ **Remember *Nixon v. The Washington Post*.** What if the president does not want to allow you in the White House or at a press conference? How will you react if this happens to you or your colleagues? What if a journalist receives threats because of a story about to be published? Keep in mind that these attacks are not always against individual reporters, but sometimes against media companies — and not always obvious. For example, allies of President Richard Nixon floated the idea of buying *The Washington Post* and taking away the licenses of TV stations it owned during the height of the paper's Watergate coverage.

■ **Every day is a battle.** The fight for freedom of speech and democracy is ongoing. Take care of yourself,

find time to have fun and rest, but never give up. We, all humankind, deserve better.

Mónica Almeida, NF '09, is an independent journalist and writer who spent most of her career at El Universo newspaper in Quito.

TURKEY

You must be vigilant and ready to raise your voice at every turn

BY GÜLSIN HARMAN

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact moment when press freedom in Turkey began to erode. Maybe it was the first in a series of seemingly legitimate media acquisitions that culminated in an expansive monopoly. Or when a reporter, fearing retaliation, tilted toward self-censorship, or a prominent columnist was forced into exile, or an editor in chief bowed to pressure from a newspaper owner seeking lucrative government contracts. In reality, it feels like it was a series of gradual steps that culminated in Turkey becoming the top jailer of journalists in the world in 2016, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. Things have only slightly improved since then, with Turkey now ranked 158th out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index.

It is this kind of death-by-a-thousand-cuts of press freedom that I would advise my American journalist colleagues to watch out for. Be cognizant of the slow-burning nature of this destruction; don't just look for big dramatic actions. You must be vigilant and ready to raise your voice at every turn. At every disparaging remark at a political rally, at each viral video mocking the work of journalists, at any incremental changes in the ownership structure of media — because these slow drips of denigration can amount to a flood that drowns a free press.

Turkey's strongman, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan — who has held onto power for more than two decades — has been astutely aware and wary of the media's power since he took office. His government has never lost sight of taking constant, if gradual, steps to dismantle guardrails and erode the institutions tasked with safeguarding media pluralism and press freedom.

Early on in his rule, as his government applied increasing pressure on journalists in the name of his own definition of the public interest, some among us wondered if it could get any worse, given the sheer force of

Engage with your audiences in as many ways as you can, as earning and maintaining their trust is now more crucial than ever.

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the attacks on the very essence of our profession. Well, it got worse.

For more than a decade, a perfect storm has been brewing of tangled business interests, weaponization of the judiciary — including prison sentences for journalists — sweeping anti-media legislation, and a campaign of sowing public distrust of the press. This has paved the way for the current landscape of staunchly pro-government media organizations, while independent outlets fight an uphill battle to stay viable.

To our American colleagues I would also say: adopt radical transparency with readers. I regret that in Turkey we could not convince our audiences to ferociously support us when the threats started to mount. In Turkey, we have not been very successful in persuading the public that the very reason for our existence is to serve them.

So, explain to people how you work, and the steps and thought processes behind your journalism. Engage with your audiences in as many ways as you can, as earning and maintaining their trust is now more crucial than ever.

Gülsin Harman, NF '20, is a frequent contributor to The New York Times and an editorial strategy consultant for alternative news organizations in Turkey.

ZIMBABWE

Journalism was made for the kind of times that America is facing

BY HOPEWELL RUGOHO-CHIN'ONO

For those of us who live in Africa, the notion of a president who refuses to acknowledge an election loss — as Donald Trump did in 2020 — is a recurring nightmare. It points to someone who doesn't respect the constitution, and is a story that our continent has lived with for decades.

Despite Trump's seemingly disqualifying behavior, he is about to be in power again, and we must learn to live with this new reality instead of pretending we can ignore it. We cannot, and we should not.

When an American president goes rogue, abusing human and civil rights such as freedom of the press, it reverberates across the world. It is not surprising that many autocrats celebrated the election of Trump as the next American president — they did so in large part because the things he says about the press mirror

what they say and do against the media in their own countries.

I can understand why American journalists might feel despondent. But they should not. Journalism was made for the kind of times that America is facing: a world where attacks on truth and expertise play out alongside actions such as Trump supporters intimidating college presidents and trying to stifle campus free speech.

This new reality of a media-bashing president needs a robust response from American journalists. They must hold the line and help the world distinguish the truth from the falsehoods in reporting on their country.

Characters like Trump love people who give up — they love quitters — because a lack of opposition allows them free rein to implement their often unconstitutional desires.

I have been jailed three times in my native Zimbabwe for exposing corruption deals involving Zimbabwean President Emmerson Mnangagwa, but I came out of the

Zimbabwean journalist Hopewell Rugoho-Chin'ono arrives at court in Harare, Zimbabwe, on Aug. 7, 2020.

ordeal stronger, and determined to do my work despite political persecution meant to stop me.

I doubt that Trump will go to the extent of jailing American journalists; the U.S. has solid, constitutionally backed institutions that will protect the media's right to work, unlike in countries such as Zimbabwe. Most African journalists I have spoken with about the American election result are placing their hopes on freedom of speech and press prevailing.

An America led by a president who repeats baseless attacks on the media and uses authoritarian tactics against reporters would be a disaster for journalists everywhere. Because America has long been the global leader in media freedom — and it must hold the line for us all.

Stay strong, colleagues — we need you to be strong. ■

Hopewell Rugoho-Chin'ono, NF '10, is a journalist and documentary film director.



PHILMON BULAWAYO/REUTERS

SUNSET IN BALTIMORE

David Smith built a television empire on sensational, crime-saturated newscasts. Then he bought Maryland's premier newspaper.

BY MARC FISHER

ILLUSTRATION BY KLAWE RZECZY

In January, when the sun first rose on David D. Smith's ownership of Baltimore's daily newspaper — a broadsheet that in its swashbuckling heyday boasted a full fleet of foreign correspondents, a muscular Washington bureau, and more than 500 reporters and editors — the shrunken newsroom bristled with anxiety about the new boss.

Smith, a 74-year-old, Baltimore-bred TV mogul with a long history of mixing his politics into his news operations, had promised to leave The Baltimore Sun's journalism to its journalists. But his record sent a different message: For decades, his Sinclair Broadcast Group's nearly 200 television stations in Baltimore and 85 other cities — one of the nation's largest assemblages of local TV outlets — had been known for sensational, crime-saturated newscasts featuring must-run conservative commentaries and investigative stories heavy on critiques of public schools.





At first, it appeared as though the rank and file in The Sun newsroom would be left alone to cover their city: Eleven days after the Key Bridge collapse that paralyzed Baltimore's vital waterfront in March, The Sun featured nine staff-written stories about the disaster on its homepage, including straight-ahead news stories on President Biden's visit to Baltimore and features about underwater salvage efforts and people who'd grown fearful of crossing bridges. The news decisions were made by Sun editors on their own, without guidance or directives from the owner.

Maryland Gov. Wes Moore, left, and Baltimore Mayor Brandon Scott embrace following a news conference at the scene of the Francis Scott Key Bridge collapse in March 2024.

"We're doing our thing," a Sun reporter told me in April, speaking on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisal from the new owner. "There's been no directive to do his bidding, nothing unsavory." When the bridge fell, "the new owners were comfortable at home in bed. We did the story. We are The Sun."

Such bravado did not last. As the months passed, reporters, political leaders, and readers noticed increasingly troubling signs. And that reporter who'd said, "We are The Sun," was scouting for a new job.

Inside the newsroom and around a city that had

long taken pride in a paper that won a Pulitzer Prize for local reporting in 2020, disappointment, embarrassment, and outrage mounted as The Sun ran harsh right-wing opinion pieces by Smith's co-owner, Armstrong Williams; "Ask the Vet" columns by Smith's daughter Devon, who is a veterinarian; and an oddly boosterish Page One feature on a new restaurant opening at the Baltimore harbor front. In the 11th paragraph of that story, The Sun disclosed that the owners of the new steakhouse, Alex Smith, the CEO of Atlas Restaurant Group, and his brother, happened to be "nephews of

SHAWN THEWEPA-EFE/SHUTTERSTOCK

Baltimore Sun owner David D. Smith, who is an investor in Atlas restaurants."

Journalists who took pride in their independence and fairness worried that they were working for an operation with a personal and all-too-often political mission. After all, Smith, executive chairman of Sinclair, had reportedly told then-candidate Donald Trump in 2016 that "we are here to deliver your message. Period." Smith's commitment to the newspaper he bought seemed questionable; he told *New York* magazine a few years ago that "the print media is so left-wing as to be meaningless dribble" and that it would simply "fade away" because it has "no credibility."

Just as in other cities where hyperwealthy Americans have bought up struggling metro newspapers with the idea that they can turn them around, Smith's purchase of The Sun created a confusing blend of hope, suspicion, and agita in the city, across Maryland, and through much of the news business. By the time he bought The Sun — paying its hedge-fund owner more than \$100 million, he has said — the paper was reduced to about 60 journalists, with no foreign bureaus, a far thinner print edition, and the same kind of sharply diminished role and audience that nearly all of America's big-city, legacy news operations now confront.

The downturn has been steep. The Sun's print circulation plummeted from 265,000 in 1995 to 43,000 in 2021, according to industry figures. As of last year, The Sun's digital subscriber base was about 85,000 readers, according to an executive at another newspaper who was privy to Sun financial data.

Smith says he is saving his hometown paper from death by a thousand cuts. He wants to invest in news coverage, hire more reporters, and hold the city's politicians to account. "I think the paper can be hugely profitable and successful and serve a greater public interest over time," he told Sun journalists at his first meeting with them.

Smith did not respond to requests for an interview, just as he has refused to comment to many other news organizations since he bought The Sun. His longtime friend Williams, who owns seven TV stations he acquired from Sinclair and whom Smith brought on as minority partner in The Sun, told me in an interview that Smith's interest in the paper stems from his passion for the city of his birth.

"Home is where his heart is," says Williams, who lives 37 miles away in Washington, D.C., and commutes an hour each way to The Sun several days a week. "David is an entrepreneur who cares deeply about the city of Baltimore and who should run this city. He wants to tackle Baltimore's deep-seated problems. He puts his money where his mouth is.

"He has a very difficult time separating himself as a private citizen from the things he owns," Williams added.

That is precisely the problem, Sun reporters say. It's the challenge faced by all the wealthy entrepreneurs around the country who have stepped in to try their hand at saving local news.

"That is the story of our time — billionaires buying big-

city papers,” says Elizabeth Hansen Shapiro, chief executive of the National Trust for Local News. “It all looks like a good idea. In fact, it’s quite a challenging proposition.”

The day after he bought The Sun, Smith met with its staff at the paper’s downtown offices for more than two and a half hours. “Welcome to the new world,” he told them.

Then he added, “I haven’t read the paper in 40 years.” He said they needed to write more about crime and government dysfunction, and he wanted them to cover the city more like Baltimore-based Fox45, Sinclair’s flagship TV station.

This did not go over well. “We’re a Pulitzer Prize-winning newsroom,” a reporter pushed back. But Smith said he wanted more aggressive coverage of political corruption and the city’s troubled school system — mainstays of Fox45’s nightly story menu.

In the months since Smith’s purchase, according to current and recently departed Sun reporters, he has neither pitched specific stories directly to the newsroom nor openly critiqued The Sun’s coverage. He still maintains in meetings with Sun staffers that he doesn’t read their stories, just the occasional headline.

But after nearly a year under new ownership, The Sun is different. And Smith’s vision for the paper is driving those differences, according to Williams, who says he makes certain that The Sun reflects Smith’s ideas about fair and aggressive reporting. For a time, the world news module on The Sun’s website consisted of foreign news summaries carrying Williams’ byline — a daily aggregation of world headlines that the co-owner said he has long put together for friends. Meanwhile, in the opinion pages, Williams’ column, “The Owner’s Box,” warned against voter fraud without citing any evidence that it happens with any meaningful frequency and declared that “crime is out of control” without reporting to back up the assertion.

In September, Sun managers fired courts reporter Madeleine O’Neill, pointing to comments she’d made on the paper’s Slack messaging system criticizing the new owners for steering The Sun in a sensational direction. The Sun’s union held a rally to protest the paper’s pivot to carrying lurid crime stories produced by Fox45 and other Sinclair outlets. The Sun also published a story using the term “illegal immigrants,” in violation of AP best practices; after Sun staffers complained, the wording was changed.

Most concerning to many in the newsroom and beyond was Smith’s involvement in city politics. The owner took on a prominent role in funding a ballot initiative to shrink the city council by nearly half. Smith’s defenders noted that The Sun duly reported Smith’s contributions to a PAC promoting the downsizing of the council.

Smith has spoken in the past about using Fox45 and other TV stations in service of his political interests. Earlier this year, in his first meeting with Sun staffers, Smith explained his TV stations’ devotion to stories about corruption and inefficiency in the Baltimore school system by saying that “if I tell the story long enough and loud enough at a personal level so people can say, ‘I can relate to them, now tell me what I can



Armstrong Williams, a conservative commentator and entrepreneur, now co-owns The Baltimore Sun with David D. Smith, CEO of Sinclair Broadcast Group.

do about it,” then his audience will “go vote for people whose view is ‘I got to fix this.’”

Inside the Sun newsroom, the accumulated changes are producing a spike in anxiety. “There’s nobody at The Sun who doesn’t have résumés out,” says David Zurawik, The Sun’s former media writer and now a media studies professor at Goucher College. “What’s left of The Sun will die. Smith bought his liberal nemesis and he’s likely to do to The Sun what he’s done with his TV station. They use a tool of enlightenment and democracy the way Roger Ailes used Fox News — as a political organization masking itself as a news operation.”

Smith’s friends and critics alike agree that he urges his properties to cover local dysfunction and discord much more intensely than his competitors might — telling hard truths, his friends say, or distorting the reality on the ground, according to critics.

“Sinclair’s pattern is to paint Baltimore and urban America as dangerous hellholes,” says Craig Aaron, co-chief executive of Free Press, a nonprofit focused on halting media consolidation. Smith’s “special sauce is adding this overly partisan slant” to news coverage. “I’m a big fan of returning newspapers to local ownership, but David Smith doesn’t seem to be the way to do that.”

KIM HARSTON/BALTIMORE SUN

Smith’s father, Julian Sinclair Smith, an electrical engineer passionate about tinkering and broadcasting, ran a school for radio announcers in downtown Baltimore before launching, in 1971, WBFF (“Baltimore’s Finest Features”) on Channel 45. It ran mostly old movies and children’s shows. Julian encouraged his four boys — David, Frederick, J. Duncan, and Robert — to spend time at the downtown offices, enlisting them to keep the studios tidy.

As a young man, David Smith wasn’t much involved in the station, which eventually became known as Fox45 for its affiliation with the Fox network. After graduating high school in 1969, Smith focused on his own business dreams, becoming a partner in a company called Ciné Processors, which made 8mm copies of pornographic films. The company, based in a building owned by Smith’s father’s radio school, collapsed after a police raid resulted in the confiscation of its wares, Smith’s fellow founder told the Los Angeles Times in 2004. In the 1980s, as his father’s health declined, Smith came back to the family business, now named Sinclair, and expanded to stations in Pittsburgh and Columbus, as well as Baltimore.

“THAT IS THE STORY OF OUR TIME — BILLIONAIRES BUYING BIG-CITY PAPERS. IT ALL LOOKS LIKE A GOOD IDEA. IN FACT, IT’S QUITE A CHALLENGING PROPOSITION.”

ELIZABETH HANSEN SHAPIRO
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF THE NATIONAL TRUST FOR LOCAL NEWS

At the Fox45 office, Smith and his brothers sat side by side in desks arranged in a row. Over time, Smith became first among equals, rising to chief executive of Sinclair in 1991, the same year Fox45 launched its 10 p.m. newscast, the city’s first at that hour. “I wanted to be an entrepreneur,” he told Forbes in 1996. “My father was too much of a visionary to care about profits. What I wanted was purely to make money.” On his desk, Smith kept a toy shark and a rattlesnake head.

In the 1990s and 2000s, Sinclair ballooned into one of the country’s largest owners of TV stations. Today, its portfolio of nearly 200 stations and 19 regional sports networks reaches about 40 percent of the country.

Sinclair’s influence spread beyond its directly owned stations through a controversial mechanism known as Local Marketing Agreements. The tool, originally designed to help struggling radio stations survive by combining staffs and programming with other outlets, allowed one owner to gain virtual control over two or more stations — even within a single market, despite FCC rules restricting the number of stations any one entity can own.

Sinclair became known for its sidecar deals, a maneuver in which a broadcast company gets around FCC ownership limits by having a friendly third party buy a station and then arrange for the first company to run the outlet. Smith’s mother, Carolyn Cunningham Smith, through a company of which she was majority owner, bought stations that Sinclair couldn’t. In 1997, for example, Sinclair bought one TV station in San Antonio and one in Asheville, North Carolina. That same year, Carolyn’s company, Glencairn Ltd., also bought one TV station in each of those markets. Glencairn signed over control of its stations to Sinclair through local marketing agreements, allowing Smith’s company to run two stations in each city. At the same time, Carolyn transferred her ownership interest in Glencairn to trusts in the names of her grandchildren — the children of the four Smith brothers, who owned Sinclair.

“IF YOU’RE NOT MAKING MONEY, YOU’RE NOT GOING TO HAVE A NEWS ORGANIZATION. PEOPLE SAY WE’RE IDEOLOGICAL, WE HAVE AN AGENDA. THEY DON’T SEE THAT WE’RE SAVING PRINT. WE’RE SAVING JOBS.”

ARMSTRONG WILLIAMS

Sinclair told *The New Yorker* that its deals were “legally permissible operating efficiencies” undertaken “to survive in a very competitive business landscape.” But in 2001, the FCC fined Sinclair and Glencairn \$40,000 each for the San Antonio and Asheville deals, which some other station owners, as well as industry watchdogs, had called anti-competitive. In 2016, when the regulator looked into Sinclair’s continued use of side-car deals, the company agreed to pay more than \$9 million to the feds, without admitting wrongdoing. Under the settlement, the FCC dropped its investigation and Sinclair kept its stations.

“What makes Sinclair’s practices disquieting,” FCC commissioner Michael J. Copps said in 2001, “are its maneuvers to acquire interests in multiple stations in seeming contravention — if not violation — of commission rules. With each transaction over the years, Sinclair has stretched the limits of the commission’s local television ownership rules.” (Years later, Copps dubbed Sinclair “probably the most dangerous company most people have never heard of.”)

Sinclair-owned and -operated stations became known for cutting costs, boosting profits, and requiring local news operations to air “must-run” stories produced by the company’s Washington bureau and by other Sinclair stations. In 2017, the FCC fined Sinclair more than \$13 million for airing more than 1,700 paid promotions for the Huntsman Cancer Institute “made to look like independently generated news coverage,” the commission concluded.

At Fox45, at least in the early years, journalists “could cover whatever we wanted,” says Jeff Barnd, who spent many years as the station’s chief news anchor. Fred Smith sent Barnd to the Amazon to produce a Fox45 series about the devastating environmental impact of clear-cutting tropical forests, a story that was inspired by Al Gore’s “Inconvenient Truth” presentation about climate change and that cut against the owners’ politics.

But as Sinclair expanded, David Smith began to press



In 2018, a viral composite video showed anchors at more than 190 Sinclair-owned TV stations reciting the same editorial, which attacked “irresponsible, one-sided” news coverage by outlets pushing “their own personal bias and agenda.” Sinclair’s practice of mandating such editorials sparked outcry among many in the media industry.

producers and reporters to do his bidding on-air, according to several former employees.

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Sinclair required its anchors around the country to recite company-provided editorials supporting the Bush administration’s “war on terror.” And in 2004, Barnd hosted a Sinclair primetime program boosting claims by an anti-John Kerry group, Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, that the Democratic presidential candidate’s congressional testimony during the Vietnam War about American atrocities had led to the torture of U.S. prisoners of war. The claims made by the group were largely discredited, and Sinclair’s own Washington bureau chief, Jon Leiberman, called them “biased political propaganda” designed to sway the 2004 election. Sinclair fired Leiberman and sued him for damages. Leiberman, who declined to comment for this article, and Sinclair settled out of court; the deal prohibited Leiberman from speaking about Sinclair.

At Sinclair stations around the country, news anchors were handed “must-run” scripts of conservative editorials from headquarters in Maryland that they were required to read out on their newscasts. Outrage over the practice went viral in 2018 when a video produced by Deadspin showed dozens of anchors at Sinclair stations around the country all reading the same “must-run” script, which lamented “the troubling trend of irresponsible, one-sided news stories plaguing our country” and took the news media to task for pushing “their own personal bias and agenda to control ‘exactly what people think.’”

Back in Hunt Valley, Maryland, Sinclair’s home base,

an executive ordered Barnd to do a story in 2015 about claims by a retired military officer that Sharia law was being enforced in several U.S. cities. “This comes from the owner,” Barnd says he was told. He interviewed the officer, who named several cities, but when Barnd checked out the claims, he found them to be groundless. “I think I have a non-story,” Barnd recalls telling his bosses. “I reported back to Hunt Valley, and I was told in no uncertain terms, ‘The story’s running anyway.’” (Sinclair did not respond to a request for comment on this article.)

Barnd’s friends urged him to quit, but that wasn’t so easy. Sinclair’s contracts were constructed to require newscasters who left before their term of employment expired to reimburse the company for a portion of their salary. That stopped or delayed some journalists from leaving.

More and more, Smith’s personal politics elbowed their way into the assignments handed to Fox45 reporters, several station veterans say. “Early on, 95 percent of the stories were non-political,” recalls Stephen Janis, a former Fox45 producer. “But then I got a bunch of assignments to do gun rights stories. Then came the incident where we accused a local activist of advocating for killing cops.”

In 2014, Fox45 reported that the activist, Tawanda Jones, led protesters in a chant of “We won’t stop. We can’t stop, so kill a cop.” But the chant was actually “We won’t stop. We can’t stop till killer cops are in cell-blocks.” Jones complained to the station, which took the story down from its website and handed Barnd a script to read on the air.

COURTESY OF TIMOTHY BURKE

“Although last night’s report reflected an honest misunderstanding of what the protesters were saying, we apologize for the error,” the statement read.

The apology wasn’t enough for some Fox45 journalists.

“I got a little scared, to be honest,” Janis says. “I had to move on.”

Smith has always argued that he keeps his views separate from his companies’ journalism, but his political donations paint a portrait of a hard-right activist who supports causes and groups often antagonistic to news organizations.

Through his family foundation, Smith has given six-figure donations to right-wing groups such as Project Veritas, which specializes in caught-on-video exposés of journalists and political figures at bars taking left-wing positions or saying dumb things; Turning Point USA, which advocates for conservative causes on college and school campuses; and Moms for Liberty, which pushes to purge school curricula of materials about gay rights, critical race theory, and gender issues.

Smith’s politics are misunderstood, Williams contends, arguing that Smith is neither a conservative nor a Republican, but rather a libertarian who regularly supports candidates from both parties. Indeed, Smith has donated through the years to Democrats such as New York Sen. Chuck Schumer, Maryland Sens. Barbara Mikulski and Chris Van Hollen, and the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee. But he’s given more often to Republicans, in Maryland and nationally, donating to candidates such as John McCain, Kevin McCarthy, and Tim Scott, and the National Republican Congressional Committee. Federal elections records show no donations to Trump’s campaigns or related organizations.

Yet Trump made no secret of his admiration for Sinclair, tweeting in 2018 that it was “so funny to watch Fake News Networks, among the most dishonest groups of people I have ever dealt with, criticize Sinclair Broadcasting for being biased. Sinclair is far superior to CNN and even more Fake NBC, which is a total joke.”

Trump’s tweet in support of Sinclair did not come in a vacuum. The bond between the president and Smith’s company traces back to 2016, when Jared Kushner, Trump’s son-in-law, told business executives in New York that the Trump campaign had made a deal with Sinclair to give its stations more access to the candidate. As reported by Politico, Kushner said Sinclair agreed in exchange to air Trump interviews without adding commentary. Sinclair stations aired 15 exclusive interviews with Trump and 10 with his running mate, Mike Pence, *The Washington Post* reported. (Sinclair said its offer of interviews to Hillary Clinton and other Democrats were declined; the Clinton campaign said at the time that it was wary of accepting because of Sinclair’s slanted coverage, but Virginia Sen. Tim Kaine, her running mate, did appear on Sinclair stations a few times.)

The ties between Trump and Sinclair quickly tightened. The day before Trump was inaugurated, Smith,



Williams, and Sinclair's chief executive, Christopher Ripley, met with Ajit Pai, who was about to become Trump's FCC chairman. Within days of taking office, Pai announced changes that made it easier for Sinclair to buy more TV stations. Soon after, Sinclair announced its plan to merge with Tribune Media, one of the country's biggest owners of TV stations.

To obey FCC limits on ownership of TV stations, Sinclair proposed selling some of its stations, but the plan was to sell some of them to the Sinclair-connected company controlled by Smith's mother's estate. "It's striking that all of our media policy decisions seem almost custom-built for this one company," Jessica Rosenworcel, the only Democrat on the FCC, told *The New Yorker* in 2018 as the deal moved toward approval. "Something is wrong."

The Sinclair-Tribune merger proved to be too much for the FCC to stomach. After protests from media diversity advocates and members of Congress — and opposition from some of Trump's other media allies, Sinclair competitors such as Fox News and Newsmax — Pai announced that Sinclair's plan to sell the stations but maintain control of them would likely be "in violation of the law."

Two years later, the FCC slammed Sinclair with the largest fine in the agency's history, a \$48 million penalty for deceiving the government when the company sold off some of its stations to companies that had close ties to the Smith family.

Despite the failure of the Tribune merger, Sinclair benefited from other FCC moves during the Trump years, such as the elimination of a rule that required TV stations to keep a studio in the market they served. That change allowed Sinclair to reduce staffing and even shut down newsrooms in several cities, including in Tulsa,

Baltimore mayoral candidate Sheila Dixon lost to incumbent Brandon Scott in the Democratic primary in May 2024. Before purchasing The Sun, Sinclair Broadcast Group CEO David Smith donated to a pro-Dixon PAC.

Oklahoma, the nation's 63rd-largest market, according to Nielsen. Sinclair's station there, ABC affiliate KTUL, produced its last local newscast on Dec. 8, 2023, and lost most of its employees. Since then, the station's news shows have come mainly from Sinclair's station 100 miles away in Oklahoma City. Sinclair explained the change in a statement, noting that the Tulsa newscast would henceforth come from a "regional content center to super-serve the Tulsa and Oklahoma City markets."

Viewers noticed, says Mark Bradshaw, a former KTUL anchor who was laid off. "I can't go anywhere without people telling me how angry they are about what happened," the former anchor says. "They say, 'I'm not interested in car crashes or house fires 90 miles away.'"

Inside the Sun newsroom, the anxiety over Smith's politics and plans for the paper is constant. Although Smith held meetings with each desk last spring, "all he tells us is that our purpose is to make him money," says one Sun reporter who attended such a meeting.

Williams confirms that turning a profit is Smith's supreme aim. "If you're not making money, you're not going to have a news organization," he says. "People say we're ideological, we have an agenda. They don't see that we're saving print. We're saving jobs."

Williams met Smith at the 1999 White House Correspondents Dinner in Washington, where they were introduced as fellow conservatives by Wesley Pruden, then editor of the Unification Church-owned *Washington Times*. Shortly after that meeting, Williams was hired to deliver commentaries on Sinclair stations, which he did until Smith fired him in 2005, soon after the FCC fined Sinclair \$36,000 for airing Williams' segments praising the Bush administration's education reforms — without

informing viewers that the government had paid Williams \$240,000 to promote its policies.

Williams says he now spends most of his time at *The Sun*. "I'm running the paper every day," he tells me. The *Sun's* masthead lists Smith and Williams first, as "principals." But much of the paper's editorial leadership remains unchanged, under publisher and editor-in-chief Trif Alatzas, who assumed that role in 2016 and has been at *The Sun* for more than two decades. Alatzas did not respond to requests for comment.

Williams says the primary changes he and Smith have made have been to emphasize print over digital, reduce the use of wire copy, focus on Maryland, and invest in covering topics such as public safety and education.

Contrary to the strategies of nearly every other newspaper, Smith and Williams want to "use *The Sun* as a model to show the United States that the way to save daily newspapers is the print model," Williams says. "You can do a TV story in 15 minutes, but with print, it's long, it's investigative. It's a much higher bar to publish than anything on broadcast. The print — you can hold onto and save and study it. It's far more engaging and far more credible than anything else. You can't post TV stories on the fridge."

These days, Williams, whose role spans the news and opinion sides of *The Sun*, says he and Smith go through the paper each morning, contradicting Smith's assertion that he doesn't read the paper. "He'll say to me, 'You might want to do more of this,' ... and I'll say to Trif ... , 'Can we look at doing more of this?'"

"This" sometimes means more stories on crime or the school system, but Williams says it does not include any political slant. "We're referees," he says. "David and I believe in neutralism."

The *Sun* has hired some reporters, but newsroom staffers remain troubled by Smith's political activism in the city they are charged with covering. In 2022, Smith bankrolled a ballot initiative to limit the terms of city council members, to the tune of more than \$500,000. The measure passed overwhelmingly. Fox45 covered the story, but without referring to Smith's donations to the campaign, according to two Fox45 newsroom employees at the time. (Fox45 referred me to Sinclair for comment on this article, but Sinclair did not respond.)

Smith staked a claim in Baltimore's mayoral race before buying *The Sun*. He gave \$200,000 to a PAC supporting former Mayor Sheila Dixon's Democratic primary challenge against Mayor Brandon Scott. Smith's adult children also gave the maximum permissible donations to Dixon, who resigned from office in 2010 after *Sun* reporting helped lead to criminal charges and her conviction for embezzling gift cards donated for low-income families.

Ahead of this year's primary, the *Baltimore Brew* reported, the Sinclair chairman struck a deal with Dixon: He would raise money for her campaign, and she in turn would support key aspects of Smith's plan for Baltimore — including getting rid of the city's school superintendent and scrapping Scott's signature crime-fighting program, which Fox45 has consistently criticized. Dixon denied having any relationship with Smith and that she

"SINCLAIR'S PATTERN IS TO PAINT BALTIMORE AND URBAN AMERICA AS DANGEROUS HELLHOLES. I'M A BIG FAN OF RETURNING NEWSPAPERS TO LOCAL OWNERSHIP, BUT DAVID SMITH DOESN'T SEEM TO BE THE WAY TO DO THAT."

CRAIG AARON, CO-CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF FREE PRESS

had offered political favors in exchange for campaign contributions. Scott beat Dixon handily. (The *Sun* made no official endorsement in the race. "I knew there'd be talk about favoritism," Williams explained. "So I said, 'You know what? Let's not endorse candidates at all.'")

Smith also funded a civic group campaigning for the ballot initiative to slash the city council from 14 members to eight. Smith said he funded the initiative to reduce government waste, but the city's charter review commission called the initiative a "blatant attempt" to influence Baltimore's government. "It would allow someone like David Smith to have even more influence over the political worldview and perspectives that are represented on the council," charter commission member Dayvon Love told *The Baltimore Banner*. Baltimore voters resoundingly rejected the initiative in November.

Between Smith's political activities and *The Sun's* increasing use of Fox45 stories — including crime and fire news and unscientific polls with leading questions — journalists in *The Sun's* newsroom have started to push back. In August, the newsroom's union denounced the use of Sinclair and Fox45 material. "These stories often lack nuance, context or opposing views," *The Sun Guild* wrote. After a meeting that the union requested with management, *Sun* stories originating from Fox45 are now labeled as such. But the stories continue to run.

Williams replied to the union, saying that "I deeply respect the opinions of the Baltimore Sun Guild. I do not impugn their motives. ... I assume the Guild reciprocally appreciates legitimate managerial prerogatives in the journalistic enterprise. Constructive criticism is always welcome even if ultimately found unpersuasive."

In the newsroom, where *Sun* journalists are working under an expired contract and without having received an across-the-board raise for more than a decade, the Guild's unit chair, reporter Christine Condon, accused Smith in a statement of seeking "to leave us defenseless, so that they can change the *Sun* however they please."

"It definitely has been frustrating to see some people say this is the end of *The Sun*," another *Sun* reporter says. "But we're not easily discouraged. We have leverage: If you start seeing us pulling our bylines from stories, you'll know we're resisting something bad."

Five days before election day on Nov. 5, the Guild announced a weeklong byline strike. ■

KARL MERTON FERRON/BALTIMORE SUN/TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE VIA GETTY IMAGES

THE LONELY CRUSADE AGAINST CASTE

To give a voice to India's marginalized, Meena Kotwal launched The Mooknayak in 2021. Now, after four years of threats and abuse, she is afraid for her daughter and the future of her news platform.

BY PUJA CHANGOIWALA



Dressed in a white salwar and tunic, journalist Meena Kotwal speaks of

equality, hope, and revolution and of leaving a better world for her 4-year-old daughter than the one she is fighting. Her eyes are resolute, her voice impassioned; and yet, in moments, all that ferocity melts into fear.

“I grew up in this same colony ... but please don’t write its name,” she says of the New Delhi neighborhood where she has an office and where the two of us meet. “I don’t want my address to be published.”

Little Dharaa sits on her mother’s lap, scribbling on her desk with her crayons. Behind them is a poster of The Mooknayak, an online news channel and website that covers issues related to the Dalit community in India, whose members are often perceived as inferior and “impure.” A Dalit herself, Kotwal founded the platform in 2021, and now, she says, she fears for her daughter’s safety.

“That’s why I registered that police complaint. The threats I receive, I want them to be limited to me, not extend to my family. But they keep dragging my daughter in,” she says.

About three years ago, Kotwal filed a complaint with a New Delhi police station, including 20 phone numbers of unknown men who had threatened her over phone and video calls. One told her to “drink the urine” of an upper-caste person, one claimed to be a police official and called her a “prostitute” and a “bastard,” one threatened to tear her butt off, another flashed his penis, and several others showered her with abuse.

“I am a journalist, and I spend most of my time outside my home, [in] the field. My 1½-year-old daughter is with me on most occasions. There is a threat to our lives,” Kotwal noted in her complaint. “Therefore, please provide security to me and my family — and these callers, who have been threatening me, should be caught as soon as possible and appropriate action should be taken.”

The complaint was filed on Jan. 5, 2022. No arrests have been made, and Kotwal believes it’s because she is a Dalit.

The Hindu caste system, which dates as far back as

3,000 years, categorizes Hindus at birth, dictating aspects of their social, professional, and religious lives. It considers Dalits — once called “untouchables” — as the lowest echelon of society, and although India’s Constitution banned caste-based discrimination in 1950, Dalits are still consigned to jobs like disposing of dead animals and manually cleaning sewers.

About 100 million Dalits — or a third of the total Dalit population — still live below the World Bank’s poverty line of \$2.15 a day, and the community continues to face extreme discrimination and violence. Around 10 Dalit women are raped every day. Their presence in Indian newsrooms, too, remains abysmal. According to a recent Oxfam India report, Dalits held zero leadership positions in the newsrooms of mainstream Indian media.

To give her community a voice, Kotwal founded The Mooknayak. She hired Dalits, Adivasis (or Indigenous people), and women as reporters, and together, they’ve been publishing written reports and videos in Hindi and English, covering individual injustices as well as policy debates concerning marginalized sections of Indian society.

“We are fighting for equality,” says Kotwal. “We are fighting for our rights. We want to be considered citizens just like you are.”

Meena Kotwal, left, stands with her husband, Raja, at The Mooknayak’s New Delhi office. She founded The Mooknayak in 2021, an online outlet covering Dalit issues, and has been subjected to violent threats over its work.

PREVIOUS PAGE AND RIGHT: PUJA CHANGOIWALA



Over the past few years, The Mooknayak has received several Indian and international journalism awards for its reportage, including a Best Media Organization award at the Human Rights and Religious Freedom Journalism Awards in 2022; however, the outlet's journey has hardly been easy. Kotwal says that she has been subjected to constant online abuse — and the smear campaign, she adds, has led to a significant drop in the money the platform raises through public donations, its main source of funds. In the past few months, Kotwal has had to downsize her editorial team from 20 to six, and now, she is afraid not just for her daughter, but also the future of The Mooknayak.

"I do not know how long we can go on this way," she says.

Away from the chaos of New Delhi, a narrow bylane leads me to the Pushpa Bhawan shopping complex, home to The Mooknayak's office. Embodying some of the contrasts of India, the compound contains graying old buildings and freshly painted ones, cars amassing dust and those newly washed, and clothes drying on makeshift clotheslines amid the offices of private enterprises. Electric wires snake along the window panes. Some of their glass panels are missing; some are broken.

I stand in the compound, searching for The Mooknayak's office — and there, above, amid the canopy of trees, I spot its logo: "The Mooknayak" written in white ink against a blue backdrop, the nib of a pen drawn next to it, and the words "Aawaz Aapki" (Your Voice). The board seems to have come off its hinge at one end.

"This is our issue. It is our pain. That is why we are different from others. That is why we are needed."

Ashok Kumar, founder and editor of Dalit Dastak

It hangs askew, held by a single screw.

Mooknayak, a Hindi word, means leader of the mute. Kotwal named her platform after a century-old publication of the same name, launched in January 1920, that aimed to vocalize the concerns of the "untouchable" community in India. That Mooknayak was a fortnightly newspaper, started by Bhimrao Raoji Ambedkar, the first law minister of independent India, widely known as the architect of the Indian Constitution and for leading colonial India's only autonomous struggle for Dalit rights and social recognition.

Between 1869 and 1943, Dalits published more than 40 journals that opposed caste-based oppression, advocated for educating Dalits, and called for Dalit representation in government jobs. As India battled for independence from the British, they also created space for Dalit voices in the national discourse.

After India's independence in 1947, several small weekly newspapers, booklets, and other print sources

were launched to advocate for the Dalit community, says Harish Wankhede, an assistant professor with the Centre for Political Studies at the Delhi-based Jawaharlal Nehru University. This, he says, was because mainstream media would not cover the political and social needs of vulnerable social groups. So such groups "published their own newspapers to educate poor masses and to establish a conscious dialogue with the ruling elites," says Wankhede.

Although more than 150 years have passed since the first Dalit journal was published, Dalits still do not have a strong representation in national media, says Ashok Kumar, founder and editor of Dalit Dastak, another news website and YouTube channel that covers issues related to marginalized communities, including Dalits. Perhaps in response, the past 15 years have seen the rise of a new wave of internet-based journalism by and for Dalits in India. A handful of news websites have emerged, including Round Table India, Velivada, and The Dalit Voice — in addition to YouTube-based news channels like Dalit Camera and The Voice Media.

Vivek Kumar, a sociologist and professor at the Centre for the Study of Social Systems in New Delhi, says that unlike mainstream publications, these new outlets highlight the issues of the Dalit community and allow Dalits to speak for themselves.

"Because of the presence of this media, the mainstream media is pressurized. And something which is getting viral in Dalit publications, mainstream media is now forced to take notice," says Kumar, citing the example of Rohith Vemula, a Dalit doctoral student, who died by suicide in 2016 after allegedly facing caste-based hostilities at his university. Vemula's death sparked nationwide protests. "The Rohith Vemula case was first taken up by the [Dalit media]. Then it became a movement of its own."

The lack of diversity in mainstream Indian media, Ashok Kumar says, means that Dalit issues are not addressed because they are not a concern for the owners of media houses or the editors and journalists who run them. "Because their identity is different. Because they can never feel the pain, the humiliation that a Dalit and [Indigenous person] feel[s] every day," says Kumar. "Dalit Dastak talks about these topics. Because this is our issue. It is our pain. That is why we are different from others. That is why we are needed."

The internet-based Dalit media, including Kotwal's outlet, Wankhede says, are often fearless and advance the interests of vulnerable groups. However, they're heavily outmatched by conventional media. "To run a national news channel, one requires heavy funds, good infrastructure, better technicians and network amongst influential people. The Dalits lack it on every account," says Wankhede.

This seemed evident the day I met Kotwal. Raja, her husband, led me to The Mooknayak's second-floor office through a dimly lit staircase. He opened the lock at the bottom of the iron shutter and raised it like a curtain. It was a working day, and the newsroom had over half a dozen chairs, awaiting staff journalists. No one was coming.



Students in Uttar Pradesh, India, express their gratitude to The Mooknayak for a story revealing that their school had not served government-mandated meals to its underprivileged children for two months.

The walls of Kotwal's office are adorned with awards and mementoes of appreciation. One certificate dated May 2022 reads, "Ambedkar Association of North America recognizes you for the exceptional work done for raising voice and awareness about the social issues of underprivileged following the vision of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar."

The award came less than a year after Kotwal reported one of her most important stories for The Mooknayak. On a rainy day in 2021, a 9-year-old Dalit girl was found dead under mysterious circumstances in the crematorium of Old Nangal village in southwest Delhi. The girl had told her parents that she was going to fetch water from a cooler in the crematorium. Less than an hour later, the crematorium's priest and a few others summoned the girl's mother and led her to her daughter's body. They claimed that the child had been electrocuted while getting water from the cooler.

The men insisted on cremating the girl's body, telling her mother that the police would demand an autopsy and then sell her organs after stealing them. The family, who earned their living by begging, was suspicious of the explanation and raised a clamor. Around 150 villagers gathered and doused the funeral pyre with water, but could retrieve only the girl's burnt legs.

"On the first day, I saw the child's legs. They were so small because they had burnt the whole body, and the people around, they tried to pull the body out, so the legs had broken," says Kotwal. "And I couldn't get that image out of my head. I, too, was a mother. My daughter, too, was little."

The Mooknayak was the first media organization to cover the story. Kotwal reported every day from the village for a fortnight, posting four to six videos a day, in addition to written stories and around a dozen social media posts. The coverage drew engagement from tens of thousands of people, she says. It also reached the mainstream press, and journalists from various media outlets started reporting on the story. As media coverage snowballed, then-Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal and Rahul Gandhi, senior leader of the opposition Congress party, visited the village. Police arrested the priest and three other workers at the crematorium,

alleging that they had gang-raped the girl, then burnt her alive.

When Kotwal reported on the case, she highlighted the child's Dalit identity. In one of her video reports, she can be seen arguing with an activist on why the victim's caste mattered, and how it had enabled her rapists.

"She was a Dalit, a beggar. It was easy for the rapist to rape her," Kotwal tells me. "Fifteen days before this crime, there was a wedding in the priest's house. If there was a wedding, there would have been women around, of all ages. Why didn't he feel like raping then? Why did this happen to that girl? Because he knew what that 9-year-old girl was. He knew that no one would listen to her in the police station because she was a beggar, a Dalit. Every woman has a caste — and when all this happens to you, it's because of your caste."

Since its inception in 2021, The Mooknayak has published dozens of stories that have made a difference to the marginalized sections of Indian society. In February 2022, it published a report about a neighborhood with a large Dalit population in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh that still hadn't been electrified. A day later, concerned authorities took notice of the report and announced on X that the area would be electrified "on priority."

In November 2022, Ankit Pachauri, deputy editor of The Mooknayak, reported a story about how the government in the central state of Madhya Pradesh had not disbursed a fund of about \$4.5 million aimed at giving loans to Dalit youths to start their own businesses. After Pachauri published a series of reports highlighting how Dalits were unable to access government programs meant for their economic empowerment, the government released the funds.

In May 2024, The Mooknayak published a story about the plight of thousands of Indigenous mine workers in Madhya Pradesh who were unable to afford treatment for lung disease. The report prompted politicians to provide financial support to one of the men quoted in the story and promise state support for other afflicted workers.

Kotwal's reporters have also covered stories of individual injustices. Soon after The Mooknayak published

the story of a homeless woman who did not have the necessary documents to access government aid, officials remedied the situation. Similarly, in response to a story about a 13-year-old Muslim boy who was beaten up because he had entered a Hindu temple, a crowdfunding campaign raised nearly \$6,000 for the boy's education.

"We're not aiming for viewership, but impact," says Kotwal. "We know it's a long battle."

As a child growing up in a Delhi neighborhood populated mainly by Dalits and Muslims, Kotwal did not realize that she belonged to a shunned group. Her parents worked as laborers, her school was dilapidated, and the family did not travel for holidays, but the five children never went without two meals a day, nor did they realize they weren't affluent. Unlike one of her friends, Kotwal did not hide her Dalit identity either, even as her father registered her name in school only as "Meena." A surname would have given away her social status.

Yashica Dutt, a New York-based Indian journalist and author of "Coming Out as Dalit," kept her Dalit identity hidden for a decade as she worked in Indian newsrooms. She says she belongs to the manual scavenging community among Dalits, which lies at the bottom of the untouchable pyramid. Dalits make up 97 percent of manual scavengers in India, cleaning, carrying, and disposing of human waste, according to a report from 2022.

"There is a descending scale of contempt, as Dr. B. R.

write less than 5 percent of all stories in both Hindi and English newspapers in India. As for news websites, upper-caste journalists write around 72 percent of the by-lined articles.

Disillusioned by her lack of prospects in the mainstream press, Kotwal abandoned journalism and pursued her master's in philosophy. Towards the end of her studies, in 2017, she learned about an opening at BBC Hindi. Her friends, including Raja, encouraged her to apply, saying that the BBC would not have caste-based biases. Kotwal applied for the job and was surprised when she got it.

Kotwal joined the BBC in September 2017, and after an initial training with several other new employees, she worked mostly on translating stories between Hindi and English. That was her main task for nine months, even as others worked on different reporting assignments. During this time, a senior editor allegedly inquired about her caste.

Kotwal made verbal complaints to the leadership, but nothing changed, even after she was promised a resolution. Slowly, she started falling ill, losing weight, and sliding into depression. In March 2019, Kotwal was told her contract would end in three months.

Rajesh Joshi, who was formerly with the BBC and was assigned as a mentor to Kotwal, says that there was a "whisper campaign" against her at the organization. He says that her colleagues would comment on her journalism, saying her English and her translation skills were weak. "She was sort of isolated in a way," says Joshi. "And caste played a major role, I think. Obviously, these things are not direct. Nobody will tell you that [because] you come from a Dalit caste, that's why you are being discriminated against. It doesn't happen that way. It happens in a very, very subtle manner."

Kotwal filed an internal complaint with the BBC, alleging caste-based discrimination. She said she was not allowed to work on many of the stories she had pitched because she was told she "was not capable to do these stories," according to the complaint. She added that her superiors knew about her Dalit background; to substantiate the claim, she pointed to a text message one of her editors sent her in Hindi. The internal investigation did not uphold Kotwal's "grievance on merit or substance that supports your allegations of caste-based discrimination." A spokesperson for the BBC said that Kotwal was on a fixed-term contract, which had ended. "The BBC is a diverse organization and is working hard to ensure that we provide opportunities to everyone, whatever their background," the spokesperson said in an emailed statement.

The episode would prove pivotal for Kotwal, who struggled to find a job after posting about her experience on Facebook. (The responses to her posts called her crazy and said she was playing the victim card, foreshadowing the online abuse she would receive later.) She says she approached several media organizations, but "they said, 'We don't like troublemakers.'"

In April that year, Kotwal and Raja married. Their union, too, was met with opposition. "My family didn't agree in the beginning, nor did Meena's," says Raja. The

Ambedkar has called it, within the caste system. So the lower you go, the higher the contempt, the higher the level of disgust, the higher the level of untouchability," says Dutt. "So if we desired to break from this cycle of caste-based labor, the only way to do that was by hiding who we were."

As a child, Kotwal's parents never forced their children to study, but unlike her siblings, Kotwal was an avid student. She completed her graduation in mass media from Jamia Millia Islamia in New Delhi, where she also met her husband, Raja. In 2014, she earned her post-graduate diploma in radio and television journalism from the Indian Institute of Mass Communication.

After graduating, Kotwal worked with Ashok Kumar's National Dastak, an online news portal, for a few months. Having dreamed of working for more mainstream platforms, she started applying for jobs, but soon realized that her Dalit identity was an obstacle. While many organizations make claims of diversity and inclusion, calling for journalists from marginalized backgrounds to apply for staff positions, rarely are such applicants hired.

According to a 2022 Oxfam study, Dalits and Adivasis



Suneeta Arya with her daughter at their home in Madhya Pradesh. After the girl was repeatedly denied entry to local schools, a story by The Mooknayak prompted officials to intervene and secure admission for her.

resistance was rooted in both patriarchy and casteism — patriarchy because a woman was getting married to a man of her choice, and not by arrangement of her parents; casteism because Raja belonged to an upper caste while Meena was a Dalit. "They said, 'How can you get married to a lower caste?' But we were firm that if we get married, we'll only get married to each other," Raja says.

After their wedding, while Raja was employed with a leading news channel, Kotwal started working as a freelance journalist, reporting from her in-laws' district in the eastern state of Bihar. Here, she would not have to pay for her food or housing, and could offer stories to various media outlets for free.

"I had to prove myself," says Kotwal. "After reading my Facebook series on the BBC, people started saying that I was playing the Dalit card, the woman card, the victim card. I wanted to prove that I know my work. Hence, I worked with many people for free."

At the time, Kotwal covered several stories of caste-based discrimination against the Dom community, a

subgroup among Dalits, in Bihar. She reported how children from the community were made to sit separately in school, how they weren't allowed to touch the water barrel in school because they would supposedly pollute it, and how some avoided school altogether because of the scolding and discrimination, jeopardizing their futures. She continued reporting on these issues during her pregnancy and after her daughter, Dharaa, was born in May 2020.

Over the course of nearly two years, as she gained a following on social media, Kotwal felt encouraged to start her own platform, focused on caste and gender. She decided she would cover stories of the marginalized, whether they were Dalits, Adivasis, Muslims, or anyone else troubled by the system, including the upper castes. In January 2021, she invested all her savings — about \$1,782 — and started The Mooknayak.

Within weeks, Kotwal hired a reporter and an editor, but the platform, although it was building an online following, did not have a source of income. Its YouTube

"We're not aiming for viewership, but impact. We know it's a long battle."

Meena Kotwal, founder of The Mooknayak

channel failed to monetize, but its journalism was proving valuable to people across India. After the outlet reported on the 9-year-old Dalit girl's alleged rape and murder in southwest Delhi, several people from the Dalit community started inquiring how they could support The Mooknayak. Kotwal set up a "Support Us" page on the website, and donations started pouring in from people within the community, including rickshaw pullers, street vendors, and laborers.

Raja says that one husband and wife, both of them day laborers, sent a video explaining why they were donating three days of their wages — about \$36 — to The Mooknayak: "Because you've raised our issues. No one else does." Those who make donations often belong to the poorest sections of Indian society, giving as little as one cent at times, Raja says.

Between November 2021 and October 2022, the platform raised over \$12,500 through online donations from hundreds of people across the country — an amount that allowed Kotwal to hire reporters in various Indian states and from various vulnerable groups. Her initial team of three, including herself, gradually expanded to 20. At first, all their donors were Dalits. However, as their coverage broadened, other marginalized groups, like the Muslim and Indigenous communities, also started donating money to the platform.

The Mooknayak doesn't sell advertising or take money from political parties, in order to retain its editorial independence. "Everything works on the basis of crowdfunding and charity," says deputy editor Pachauri, who has worked with The Mooknayak since 2021. "We are dependent on people who think that the issues of Dalits and Adivasis should be raised."

About 500 miles away from Kotwal's office, in a small village in Uttar Pradesh, a group of 20 children stand holding a pink poster. "Thank you The Mooknayak," it says, with a smiley face beaming next to the words.

The children's gratitude was for Rajan Choudhary, a journalist with The Mooknayak, who discovered that their government-run school had not served meals to the underprivileged children for two months, despite being mandated by the Indian government under a mid-day meal program. A cook told The Mooknayak that she was "forced" to dilute the milk served to children. The investigation, published in September 2022, went viral.

"People started questioning the school administration. They started questioning the government," says Choudhary.

Choudhary learned about the malfeasance from Shivani Choudhary, founder of Moma for Daughters, a nonprofit focused on the education of poor children. She had posted about the issue on her social media, and she says the school authorities were pressuring her to remove the video. She approached Rajan Choudhary with the story, and "after the report was published, not just that school, but all schools in this area have started serving proper meals to the children." (There are about 16 schools in the region.)

The Mooknayak and its reporters have won several

awards for their reportage, including the Laadli Media Award for Gender Sensitivity, and a "Diversity Woman of the Year" award by two organizations working on social equity. In 2022, The Mooknayak also won Best Media Organization at the Human Rights and Religious Freedom Journalism Awards (HRRFJ). The outlet was shortlisted alongside leading Indian news platforms including Scroll and Newsland, and won the award jointly with Article 14.

"Raja and I were elated when we got this because many leading media organizations had applied for it," says Kotwal, pointing to the HRRFJ award on her desk. "We were so happy that we were screaming. It felt like we had finally arrived in the race, that we were now comparable to mainstream publications."

However, Kotwal did not realize that she was about to face a major setback — that even as The Mooknayak's popularity increased, so did the hate, and then the financial worries.

About three days before we met, Kotwal attended a New Delhi court hearing in a case she had filed against an X user in October 2021. The person had made casteist remarks against Kotwal and her family on X, and then, through direct messages, threatened to commit suicide if she filed a police complaint. Another tweet said: "These idiots keep abusing the Brahmins [the highest among India's castes] all day long; have these people, who clean toilets, become so powerful? To hell with Hindu unity, kill them immediately."

The police registered the case under a 1989 law against caste-based abuse; however, in the three years since Kotwal filed the complaint, no arrests have been made. Citing the police's inability to find the perpetrator, the judge allegedly asked Kotwal to withdraw her complaint. "I'm not going to withdraw the case," she says. "Had this been a case involving a VIP, they would have found the accused immediately."

Similarly, no arrests have been made in Kotwal's other police complaint, the one over the threats she received by phone and video from around 20 unidentified men, even as the United Nations demanded answers from the Indian government. The threats came in response to Kotwal's burning a page of the Manusmriti, an ancient Hindu text that relegates women and Dalits to the lowest rungs of society. The U.N. noted that it was "deeply concerned by the numerous threats against [Kotwal's] life and physical integrity." It added that the threats appeared to be "in direct retaliation for her exercising of her right to freedom of opinion and expression online" and revealed "a seriously concerning online environment for women journalists, human rights defenders, politicians and activists." However, the threats and harassment have continued unabated.

In April last year, Kotwal traveled to the U.S. at the invitation of universities such as Harvard and Columbia. Elated, on April 4, 2023, she posted on her Instagram account, "The daughter of a Dalit laborer has come to Columbia University to give her talk on media and diversity." What followed, says Raja, was a campaign of troll-



ANDREW AITCHISON/GETTY

ing and online harassment, including questions about Kotwal's identity as a Dalit, why she had chosen to marry an upper-caste man, and how she could name her publication The Mooknayak when it was the name of Ambedkar's publication.

"They started trolling as soon as we returned from the U.S.," says Raja. "And gradually, our crowdfunding was completely shut down."

The trolling, led by members of the dominant subsection within the Dalit community, sowed doubts about Kotwal's caste status among The Mooknayak's donors, who came to believe that she was lying about it. Despite Kotwal sharing her caste certificate online in May 2023 to debunk the claims, fundraising continued to decline.

In the past year, The Mooknayak has struggled to make ends meet. Crowdfunding was its main source of financing, and the online harassment, says Raja, has meant a huge blow to its finances. Now, the organization is desperately looking for new funders.

The Mooknayak's struggle is emblematic of the state of Dalit journalism in India, says Sudipto Mondal, a Dalit journalist. "A few new outlets have emerged, including The Mooknayak. But the way they are existing is proof of their marginalization because they're struggling like crazy."

In many ways, life has come full circle for Kotwal. Although she now leads an award-winning news platform, her crusade against caste is almost as lonely as the day she started The Mooknayak. But there are thousands of Dalits,

Adivasis, women, and other marginalized people who have benefited from her publication's coverage of their issues.

An example is Suneeta Arya, a Dalit woman from Madhya Pradesh, who gave birth to a daughter out of wedlock, following which villagers shunned her family. When her daughter turned six, Arya tried to enroll her in a private school near her village but was allegedly told, "We do not want to spoil our image by admitting children like yours." Arya approached other schools, several government officials, and six or seven media outlets for help but got nowhere. But Pachauri saw the story's value and pursued it for The Mooknayak, prompting the government entity tasked with protecting the rights of caste-based minorities to intervene and secure admission for Arya's daughter.

Pachauri, who has worked with several mainstream publications in the past decade, agrees that other platforms would not have allowed him to cover Arya's story. He says he knows that The Mooknayak is struggling for funds, but he is committed to the platform.

He is one of the six journalists left in The Mooknayak's newsroom, including Kotwal and Raja. Like the others, he reports from elsewhere in the country, and Kotwal is considering giving up her office to save on the monthly rent.

Kotwal, however, seems undeterred by the developments of the past year and a half. She says that the threats and hate have extinguished the fear inside her and made her stronger. She is determined to go on, she says — "even if I have to do it alone." ■

Children from a Dalit community in the Maharajganj district of Uttar Pradesh take part in classes through Manav Sewa Sansthan, a nonprofit that runs educational programs in rural areas.



REPORTING ON EMPTY

If the industry doesn't provide for younger journalists, will they stay?

BY MARIGO FARR

My mother says she never meant to be a journalist. She did it because she was looking for a way to support her music passion. “I didn’t have J-school swagger,” she recently told me. “[But] I could bullshit my way anywhere.” It was the 1970s and she was living in New York City. She’d recently graduated from college as an English major with no practical skills and the feeling she was “teetering on the edge of a black hole.” The only thing she wanted was to be a professional viola player.

While scheming ways to make a music career, she looked for a more conventional job. She found a posting in *The New York Times* for a “teeny tiny” publishing house that had two partners and a bookkeeper.

“They wanted someone else, a body,” my mother said. “They put me down as an editorial associate on the masthead because they wanted bodies.”

In reality, she wasn’t just a body. She was a receptionist and did real work. But her use of the word “body” strikes me. This small magazine had enough resources to hire someone mostly to make their outfit look bigger — someone who had no training and expressed no enthusiasm for the trade.

Now, my mom, Nadine Post, 74 (pictured above), is one of the best-known journalists in the construction industry. She just retired from a 52-year career, most of which was at the construction magazine *Engineering News-Record*, where she wrote roughly 4,000 stories, 300 of them cover stories for the print magazine. She’s earned countless awards for excellence in business-to-business journalism.

ADAM GLANZMAN



Juxtaposed with today's media landscape, my mother's entree into journalism is almost laughable. While she assures me that journalists have always worked extreme hours for little pay, and that part of her success was because she wasn't picky or idealistic (which she says I am), there's no question that conditions are worse for later generations. Today's young reporters work for free, take on debt, endure mistrust and hatred on social media, and are expected to be experts in multimedia with their own unique brands — all for the best-case scenario of ... a modest salary and a job that demands long hours? If we're lucky.

Unlike my mother, most of us don't become journalists to subsidize our passions. Journalism is the passion.

In my mid-30s, passion was my only reason for switching careers and entering the trade. At the time, I had a stable job and a reasonable salary at an environmental nonprofit. What I did best in that job was ask hard questions. But that wasn't the job. I was the one whose head got stuck deep in New York State statute, intending to clarify one aspect of solar policy but going down a rabbit hole of philosophical questions about tax credits and policy design. I always wanted to go deeper, and I thought that as a journalist I'd have the time to. I also imagined I'd be like Erin Brockovich, sneaking around and extracting samples from vats of contaminated water.

I was able to follow my passion because I have savings and my family is fully behind this new direction. I remember calling my mom after a tearful conversation with a journalist peer who'd left the field because she couldn't find a full-time job. I had just made the big decision to go to graduate school for journalism and was already discouraged. My mom said something like, "If it makes you happy, that's the most important thing. The money will come."

That remains to be seen. This is my second year out of graduate school, and I'm just approaching covering my living expenses. I'm an adjunct journalism professor with a contract renewed by semester, I'm a part-time editor, and I'm freelancing for a few outlets. If I have a child, I likely won't have paid parental leave. My "salary" is cobbled together from part-time work — no predictability and no benefits.

The thing is, I don't have it that bad. I now have two master's degrees, so I could easily find other work. And I have parental support if I want to buy a house, which I could never do alone with my current assemblage of income.

But this arrangement should not be what's required for new journalists to break into the industry. Journalism will never be the most lucrative field, but we live in a time when humanity's actual survival depends on asking hard questions about climate change, on telling people's stories who are often overlooked, and on reporting the truth. We can't rely on exceptional scenarios to produce the journalists who will carry out this responsibility. It's not fair to the hopeful journalists who have the passion, and it's not fair to the public.

I decided to talk to my peers about their situations — people who, like me, had a belief that they could direct their minds, hearts, and storytelling skills toward

PREVIOUS PAGE: Sophie Park, a freelance photojournalist, has done work for The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal. But she is uncertain about her financial future, saying pay rates do not typically keep pace with inflation.

"I JUST WOULD REALLY LIKE TO BE IN A WORLD WHERE, I DON'T KNOW, I CAN MAKE ENOUGH MONEY TO BUY STRAWBERRIES AND NOT FEEL GUILTY ABOUT IT."

LYDIA LARSEN



something that might keep our crumbling democracy together. Each one has a particular set of conditions that make it possible, for now, to be a journalist. But hearing their stories, I'm glad I didn't talk to them before I made my own decision.

They're doubtful, discouraged, and debt-ridden. They're working side jobs and living paycheck to paycheck. And what hurts the most is to hear some of them question whether there's something wrong with *them*. Whether or not they have the right emotional constitution to be in journalism — work that they love, that they're good at, and that we need so desperately.

These people represent the journalists-for-now. But at what cost? And for how long?

LYDIA LARSEN, 23

*Freelance science journalist and baker
Madison, Wisconsin*

Waking at 3:50 a.m. could be a reasonable way for a journalist to start their day. Perhaps they work the early shift at a 24-hour news channel. Perhaps they're getting ready to fly overseas to cover a conflict. Or maybe they're just on deadline.

But that's not what Lydia Larsen's alarm is for. She's

waking for her 5 a.m. shift at a bakery about 15 minutes' walk from her apartment in Madison, Wisconsin, where she works three days a week to supplement her journalism income. Despite having a degree in science communication and two esteemed journalism fellowships under her belt — with the American Association for the Advancement of Science that placed her at Inside Climate News (ICN) and, more recently, with Sierra Magazine — she hasn't found a full-time job.

"I don't think I'll ever really get used to the 3:50 a.m. alarm," said Larsen. "That was a tough adjustment."

The decision to work at the bakery came when she finished her first fellowship, with ICN. "[I was] staring into the abyss of unemployment, and I was like, 'Oh my God, what do I do now?'"

"If you look at my file of applications for jobs: deeply depressing. And I gave up on organizing it."

She kept freelancing for ICN, along with other odd writing jobs. One was with an alumni magazine that paid fairly well. But she knew she needed a regular job — one that wouldn't conflict with normal working hours.

"Obviously you can ... read through documents whenever you want," she said. "But when you need to interview people, usually that's in business hours."

A week after she started at the bakery, she went to the National Association of Science Writers conference,

Lydia Larsen, a freelance reporter in Madison, Wisconsin, at the bakery where she works a 5 a.m. shift to make ends meet. Despite two journalism fellowships, she hasn't secured a full-time media job.

NIYA DOYLE, 24

*Consultant and aspiring beauty editor
Brooklyn, New York*

In May, Niya Doyle wrote a piece for Editor & Publisher titled: "Is journalism just a rich kid's hobby?"

"Who can survive on the \$15–20 an hour a full-time internship might offer? Let alone perform free labor for publications that can't afford to pay writers anything at all?" she wrote. "But without clips, you can't grow in the field or eventually write for larger publications, which means bigger earning potential."

It's a dilemma Doyle feels acutely. She grew up in New Jersey with working-class parents who encouraged her to pursue whatever academic direction she chose, but she had to take out hefty private and federal loans to get through undergrad at Boston University. While in college, Doyle wrote for several campus publications, including Boston University's Daily Free Press, Her Campus BU, and pop culture magazine Bee Buzz. But, as she learned more about the field, she felt the risk of not getting a reliable, salaried journalism job was too high.

"People who ... [are] able to pursue journalism full time usually have some sort of support system, whether that's parents helping them out or maybe they got a full ride," Doyle said. "I know that journalists don't

because she was still doing everything she could to advance her journalism career.

"I remember at a certain point between ... the travel [and being] overwhelmed at a conference ... I was like, 'Damn, you're delirious with exhaustion right now.'"

This year, she's going to the conference again. "This job isn't going to get better if I don't network a bit," she said, feeling the weight of still not having a full-time job.

She has already spent \$600 on flights and registration, and will pay some more to split a hotel room with a friend. She's taken on extra shifts at the bakery and upped her freelancing with the alumni magazine, which will "hopefully" allow her to cover the conference costs as well as other life expenses in the coming months.

Larsen doesn't have debt, is on her parents' health insurance for a few more years, and is "vibing" with her current roommate in an apartment in Madison. But if any of those conditions were different, she'd be in trouble.

It's not like freelancing is all bad, but it comes at a cost.

"I can do whatever the hell I want," said Larsen. "I can cover horseshoe crab-spotting one week and a constitutional amendment ... the next. ... But the constant anxiety of, 'Okay, I'm pitching this now [and] if they accept it I should be getting this paycheck not this month, but next month ... and if I need this much money to pay my bills' — I don't know how long I can live like that."

For now, her dreams are simple. "This is really quaint, but I just would really like to be in a world where, I don't know, I can make enough money to buy strawberries and not feel guilty about it," she said. "I'm just caught up in the day-to-day of my own survival."

actually get paid a lot and paid internships are few and far between. So I'm like, for my financial future, maybe journalism isn't the greatest choice."

To pay her bills, Doyle works as an associate producer at a digital consulting firm while freelancing — often for little to no pay — to build her portfolio. She writes about beauty and pop culture for publications like Autostraddle and Haloscope. In a recent article, she shed light on the limiting and potentially racially problematic nature of the "clean girl" makeup aesthetic, pointing out that "clean makeup implies there is dirty makeup" and celebrates the "Clean Girl-approved color palette."

Despite knowing she would take a pay cut from her current salary of \$70,000, Doyle still applies for entry-level journalism jobs from time to time but feels like her résumé "just goes into the void."

Her current strategy: keep a foot in the field by freelancing, and when Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at the City University of New York (hopefully) goes tuition-free in 2026, she'll apply — if she doesn't burn herself out before she gets there.

She's not taking the barriers to entry personally, but she does think that having journalists with a range of identities makes journalism stronger.

"If the media industry wants to ... hear stories from young people ... if they want people of more diverse backgrounds," she said, education has to be affordable and media executives have to stop "de-prioritizing our work."

SOPHIE PARK, 26

*Freelance photojournalist
Cambridge, Massachusetts*

By most measures, Sophie Park is succeeding as a freelance photojournalist. At 26, she has consistent work with outlets like The New York Times, The Washington Post, and The Wall Street Journal. This past year, she caught a moment when student protesters at MIT knocked over police barricades, snapped grizzly bears and their cubs in Alaska, and covered the Democratic and Republican national conventions. But despite these high-profile gigs, she doesn't feel secure.

"It feels like I'm just always waiting for the other shoe to drop," said Park, who remembered a tense day in December 2023 when she had three photo assignments across two states: a morning assignment at the Boston Tea Party Museum, a hospital in the early afternoon, and then a trip to New Hampshire, where Gov. Chris Sununu was expected to endorse Nikki Haley for president.

She'd said yes to everything, not because anyone was forcing her, but because the lifeblood of freelancers is their reputation with their editors, and editors like a freelancer whom they can call on easily.

"In fact, there's even a saying amongst some freelancers that there's no such thing as saying no," she added.

Park got her first big break just a year out of college.

"WHO CAN SURVIVE ON THE \$15–20 AN HOUR A FULL-TIME INTERNSHIP MIGHT OFFER? LET ALONE PERFORM FREE LABOR FOR PUBLICATIONS THAT CAN'T AFFORD TO PAY WRITERS ANYTHING AT ALL?"

NIYA DOYLE



EDNA LESHOWITZ

One of her photojournalist friends had to pass on an assignment at The Washington Post, so she was introduced to an editor there. Her career took off after that. She now grosses up to \$80,000 a year, which, after taxes, is enough to pay her half of a \$2,600-per-month one-bedroom apartment she shares with her partner, who has a stable income. And she sees this, in some ways, as a success.

"It seems so unlikely that I have made it to this point where I'm sustaining myself as a freelance journalist in this economy," she said.

But the grind of freelancing is draining on many levels. It's traveling, maintaining her own collection of expensive equipment, buying her own health insurance, and putting expenses from gigs on her own credit card before getting reimbursed. It's financial planning, which she does on a 12-column spreadsheet that tracks when she'll get paid for each assignment. It's "dealing with a million bosses," living "in fear of losing a potential client all the time." And she's managing non-journalistic clients, who account for about 20 percent of her income.

"I still feel like I need to chase those corporate

events and really build those other pillars of support and money ... because you never know what one pillar might crumble."

She said she feels lucky, especially given the current environment for freelancers, with day rates that generally do not keep up with inflation. But she would not be able to afford her apartment if she didn't have a partner. She might want a child, but can't imagine bringing another person into the mix with the mental load she's carrying.

"I'm just really hard on myself. And I think most journalists are," she said.

"It's one thing to show up physically for an assignment. It's another thing to really connect with who you're photographing, to be situationally aware, to make good calls ... [then] reporting, collaborating with a writer, managing communication with your editor."

If she does decide to have kids, she'll have to cut journalism gigs and up her commercial work, which pays twice as much for a shorter day.

"I feel like doing photojournalism has become this noble thing and really ... it's [only] this noble thing because you have to make all these sacrifices to do it,"

Niya Doyle works as a producer for a digital consulting firm and freelances on the side to build up her portfolio. Doyle, who comes from a working-class background, says she lacks the support system many journalists need to stay in the industry.

she said. "[Or] maybe I'm just a snowflake. Maybe I'm asking too much."

ABRIL MULATO SALINAS, 39

*Fact checker, reporter, editor
Mexico City, Mexico*

Working three different jobs to pay rent, having health insurance only sometimes, and getting laid off when newsrooms shrank or collapsed were conditions that Abril Mulato Salinas was used to as a journalist in Mexico. But when she got a Mexico City-based position as a fact checker for The Associated Press in 2019, she thought that could change. She terminated her freelance projects and had about five years' peace of mind. Then she got laid off.

"When I received my definite contract here in the AP, I decided to leave everything [else]. It was less money, obviously, but I ... wanted to have a life," she said. "The salary was good enough for me to have a good life."

Mulato, who has been a journalist since 2007 and has worked for places such as NBC Telemundo and El País, expects journalism to have highs and lows. But the relief she felt at finding stability and a reasonable salary meant a lot. Losing that was awful.

"It's sad to say this, but I've been through this before. ... But I thought that because it was a company based in the U.S., and that it was a big company," things might be different.

Last year, Mulato and her partner had decided they wanted to buy a house. But when she went to New York to visit the U.S.-based portion of her team, her boss told her they were going to close the Mexico office. She came back and told her partner, "We can't do it. I mean, I'm not gonna be paying for something when I don't have a stable job."

She and her partner typically split their expenses evenly. This past year, he started covering more than half of the rent because of the months when Mulato had either no work or comparatively lower-paying jobs. Since January, she's applied for more than 20 positions, and is relying on temporary gigs like her current contract writing stories for Turkish Radio and Television Corporation.

"When I stopped working at the AP, I had to look again for new clients, gigs," she said. "The people that used to be at some media [outlets] weren't there anymore. And it's starting ... fresh, and it was hard."

Mulato made the decision to pursue journalism when she was 17, and when she did, her father said, "*Te vas a morir de hambre*" — "you're going to die of hunger." He joked that he would open up a grocery store for her as a backup plan. Mulato's more realistic backup plan is working in communications, to which some of her struggling journalist peers have migrated.

Her father died this year after a life of working jobs that were not satisfying. But the work Mulato does fulfills her deeply, so she's making sacrifices and plans to stick it out.

"I don't want to do what my father did," she said. "I'd rather be happy." ■

1983

Callie Crossley, host of the GBH News program “Under the Radar with Callie Crossley,” won an National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ) commentary award for two of her stories: “From Patrick Mahomes to LeBron James, let’s celebrate modern makers of Black history” and “Remembering a treasured New Year’s Day tradition with Dad.”

1984

Derrick Z. Jackson won two NABJ Salute to Excellence Awards for “Black College Students: An Endangered Species, Unless They Play Ball” in The American Prospect and “The Right Foundation,” co-written with wife Michelle Holmes, for A.T. Journeys Magazine.

1992

Melissa Ludtke is author of “Locker Room Talk: A Woman’s Struggle to Get Inside,” her account of the groundbreaking 1978 gender discrimination case Ludtke v. Kuhn, which she won. The federal court decision opened the door to greater access for women in sports journalism.

1997

Paige Williams, a staff writer for The New Yorker, won a 2024 Mirror Award for “A Small-Town Paper Lands A Very Big Story,” about a father-son reporting duo at the Gazette in McCurtain County, Oklahoma, who uncovered explosive revelations about the local county sheriff.

1998

Phillip Martin, a senior reporter for GBH News’ Center for Investigative Reporting, received three NABJ Awards for “Coretta Scott King: The other ‘King’ of Boston”; “A Lowell college baseball player was kicked off the team. He believes racism is at the root of it”; and “Right leaning groups opposed to diversity efforts find unlikely allies in Newton parents.” Martin was also inducted into the Massachusetts Broadcasters Association’s Hall of Fame.

2007

Eliza Griswold, a contributing writer for The New Yorker, is author of “Circle of Hope: A Reckoning with Love, Power, and

Justice in an American Church.” In March, she was named director of the Humanities Council’s Program in Journalism at Princeton University.

2012

John Nery, a columnist and editorial consultant at Rappler, received a Journalists of Courage and Impact Award from the East-West Center during its International Media Conference in Manila, Philippines.

2013

Finnbarr O’Reilly joined the VII Photo agency as a contributing photographer. On Instagram he wrote, “My main focus will be supporting the VII Foundation’s core mission to develop and promote the careers of emerging photographers from the global south and other underrepresented communities.”

2016

Andrea Bruce, a photographer, educator, artist, and writer, earned a Master of Fine Arts from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She showed her work along with classmates in an exhibition organized by the SAIC Galleries in July 2024.

Mónica Guzmán, author of “I Never Thought of It That Way: How to Have Fearlessly Curious Conversations in Dangerously Divided Times,” received an honorary degree from Wheaton College. The college recognized her work to foster understanding across social and political divides.

Wendi C. Thomas, founder of the nonprofit newsroom MLK50, received the 2024 Lorraine Branham IDEA Award during the Mirror Awards ceremony. The award recognizes a media organization that has worked to promote inclusion, diversity, equity, and accessibility.

Wonbo Woo has joined CBS News as a producer for “CBS Sunday Morning.” He most recently was an independent producer and adjunct assistant professor at Columbia Journalism School.

2018

Edward Wong, diplomatic correspondent for The New York Times and author of “At the Edge of Empire: A Family’s Reckoning with China,” received an honorary

doctorate from the Middlebury Language Schools. He studied Chinese at the school in 2007 prior to his posting to China for The Times.

2019

John Sutter, a 2019 Visiting Nieman Fellow, has joined the University of Oregon School of Journalism as an assistant professor of science communication. He will focus on finding and teaching more effective ways to tell the story of the climate crisis.

2020

Selymar Colón has been appointed managing director of Platea Media in San Juan, Puerto Rico. In the newly created role, she will lead the strategic and editorial growth of the digital media platform. Colón most recently served as executive director of digital for GFR Media in San Juan.

Chastity Pratt has joined The Washington Post as national education editor. Pratt joins the Post after four years at The Wall Street Journal, where she served as its first education bureau chief.

2023

Amanda Becker, Washington correspondent for the 19th, is author of the book “You Must Stand Up: The Fight for Abortion Rights in Post-Dobbs America.” It tells the story of the grassroots leaders working for abortion rights after the Supreme Court’s Dobbs decision overturned Roe v. Wade.

2024

Manasseh Azure Awuni, a Ghanaian investigative journalist, authored “The President Ghana Never Got,” an examination of President Nana Akufo-Addo’s time in office and the controversies surrounding his leadership.

Ilya Marritz joined The Boston Globe in June 2024 to work on a forthcoming narrative podcast project. He also has been appointed to the Radio Catskill Board of Trustees.

Rachel Pulfer has been named the first president of Journalists for Human Rights (JHR) in Toronto. In her new role, she will focus on growth strategy for JHR, Canada’s largest international media development organization. ■

Judith Havemann, NF ’80, longtime Washington Post reporter and editor, dies at 80

An appreciation by
1980 Nieman Fellows
Lynda McDonnell
and **Judy Stoia**

Havemann, who spent more than three decades at The Washington Post and worked in numerous roles including deputy National editor, chief newsroom recruiter, and editor of the Food section, died on July 28, 2024, at her home in Washington, D.C. She was 80 years old.

Judy Havemann was a tiny woman — 4’11” — who lived an outsized life. She remembered that her first job was on the family farm in Millersburg, Michigan, (population: 210) milking cows. She was 3 years old. It was an isolating existence on a farm that required hard work and early on, Judy imagined something much different.

“She willed herself out” of the life she was born into, said her son Will Havemann.

Propelled by intelligence, remarkable energy, and a probing curiosity, Judy graduated from Michigan State, then moved through small-town newspapers to a reporting job at the Chicago Sun-Times. There she met and married fellow journalist Joel Havemann, who’d been raised in Manhattan and majored in math at Harvard.

Judy arrived at The Washington Post in 1973 and began a quick ascent, becoming one of the Post’s first generations of notable female journalists. Her three-decade career at the paper began as Virginia editor, then Maryland editor on the Metro desk before her Nieman year in 1979. Judy returned to join the National desk and then moved up to deputy National editor.

Later she served as the newsroom’s recruiter and Food editor.

Meanwhile, she and Joel had three children — Anne, then twins Will and Margaret, who joined Theresa, a daughter from an earlier marriage. Together over 47 years of marriage, they managed careers, raised kids, welcomed visitors,



Judy Havemann, right, was one of The Washington Post’s first wave of star female reporters. Here she is enjoying downtime with her daughter, Anne.

hosted dinner parties, and traveled widely, including three years working from Brussels.

Judy’s colleague Robert Jacob Samuelson, a former economics columnist for the Post, remembered her dedication to her profession: “Judy loved journalism, and she was a perfect fit. Her curiosity was boundless. There was no story too small or apparently too insignificant to escape her attention. She served as both the Maryland and Virginia editors — ‘the best we ever had,’ as one Post executive put it. Her capacity for work was prodigious.”

After taking a buyout from the Post in 2006, Judy worked first as an editor for the Wilson Quarterly, then as public relations director for the National Endowment for the Humanities. Until Covid-19 hit, she taught a beginning reporting class at the University of Maryland.

When her paid work ended, Judy’s public service work ramped up. She wrote postcards and knocked on doors for

candidates, worked as an election judge, and organized classes for the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at American University. During the lockdown, she planned online activities to connect elderly people who were isolated in their homes. She took piano lessons, joined book groups, brought visiting scholars into her home, and played with seven much-adored grandchildren.

To be Judy’s friend was to bask in her hospitality, curiosity, storytelling, and self-deprecating humor.

We became the friends of a lifetime — an enduring gift of our Nieman year. We told jokes, discussed national politics, and traveled together. A trip to Monticello that traced Thomas Jefferson’s slave ownership and relationship with Sally Hemings underscored our shared interest in history, particularly America’s racial history.

Regular Zoom calls kept us connected through Covid and through Joel’s long battle with Parkinson’s.

We planned a trip to Austin, Texas, for January 2022. But in December 2021, Judy was diagnosed with incurable colorectal cancer. Through years of surgery, chemo, and radiation, she showed her characteristic resolve and interest in the world. Remarkably — unless you knew Judy — she was uncomplaining.

At the end of one Zoom conversation last spring, she asked: “Did I tell you I’m going on a cruise?” No, she hadn’t.

Turns out she’d booked a solo cabin on a cruise to see the coasts of Ireland and Scotland.

“If I’m going to die, I might as well look at something besides my living room walls,” she said. On board, she befriended a pair of retired teachers.

A few weeks before Judy’s death, her children threw her an 80th birthday party. Some 130 people came to celebrate her birthday. When time came for Judy to speak, she was characteristically modest — thanking her kids and her guests and urging us to eat the appetizers in the next room.

We will miss her greatly. ■

Picking Up Where Slain Journalists Leave Off

For **Sandrine Rigaud**, NF '25, a multicultural childhood opened a path to *Forbidden Stories*.

I want to become a journalist because I think it's a job that makes the world aware of humanity's serious problems," I wrote in careful cursive letters for a middle school essay that my parents have kept to this day. "I could fight injustice in this world in my own way."

Beyond the naïve and presumptuous writing style I used at the time, I had a sense that the best way to make sense of the complexities of the world — and of my own upbringing — might be through journalism.

We had recently moved to Paris after six years in Syria when I told my family about my interest in journalism. Before that, we lived in Egypt where my father, a French teacher, had met my mother, the daughter of a dentist from the Coptic upper class of Alexandria. Despite a nice childhood in which I was loved and spoiled, I saw from an early age signs that the world was a more complicated and dangerous place beyond the confines of my happy home.

The Middle East ran through my veins. Its landscapes, its climate, and its history shaped my young life. In 1982, we moved to Syria. That was the same year President Hafez Assad ordered his troops to crush an uprising in the central city of Hama, killing an estimated 10,000 to 40,000 Syrians. To this day, the exact death toll remains in dispute. Those who dared to speak up simply disappeared. I would find out about the scale and details of the event much later, but I remember very clearly as a child my father mentioning that some relatives of his Syrian friends had vanished. He told me what he knew about the massacre and the horrors of Syrian prisons, but he made it clear that I should never talk about politics outside of

our home.

I also understood early on that the school I went to was full of spies and my judo teacher was certainly a mukhabarat, which is Arabic for "secret police." Some of my close friends were the children of people who worked for the regime, and I could never confide in them.

I knew instinctively from a young age that the world was brutal, yet strangely believed it did not apply to me. I felt as if I was immune to danger. Maybe it was because I was a child in a loving family, maybe because I had a French passport, or because my name was Sandrine Rigaud. In the Middle East, I was a girl with a French name and blue eyes who spoke Egyptian Arabic. How could anything go wrong?

Ironically, it was not until my father moved the family to Paris in the late 1980s for his job — a place I had every reason to feel safer in than the tumultuous Middle East — that I started to feel uneasy. It felt like the end of a golden age: I was becoming a teenager, my parents were having money issues, and I wrote my school essay about wanting to become a journalist.

I don't want to unfairly judge my 12-year-old self, but I was likely more driven by a desire to stand out from the other students at the time of writing that essay than by a moral imperative to become a journalist. I wasn't sure where my home was, and I didn't know who — Egyptian? French? Syrian? — I really was. But journalism struck me as a vocation that could encompass all of it and allow me to hold on to my enchanted childhood. I wanted everyone to understand that I was a citizen of the world. In journalism, my various identities could be an asset and, oddly, even a form of invisible protection.



Sandrine Rigaud, left, her sister Carole, mother, and father at their home in the Mezzeh district of Damascus, Syria, in 1987. The family later relocated to Paris.

Almost three decades later I became editor in chief of *Forbidden Stories*, a nonprofit that protects the work of threatened journalists and continues with the unfinished reporting of those who have been killed. It is not an easy job, and starting out, I questioned every choice I made. But I had no doubt I was in the right place.

Suddenly, the duality of my childhood made sense. I understood what censorship

was. I had felt it as a child in Syria. But I was also conscious of the great privilege of freedom of expression, living in countries that embraced it. I was using my voice, freely, to report on what other

journalists had been silenced for. I have investigated and led cross-border projects on narco-politics in Mexico, the lies told by mining companies in Latin America, state corruption in Azerbaijan, and the inner workings of the secretive world of disinformation mercenaries working almost everywhere on the planet. One of our largest global investigations, The Pegasus Project, exposed the illegal use of spyware by authoritarian regimes to surveil

journalists, human rights activists, and others across the globe.

I am often asked if I feel scared to take over the investigation of somebody who has been assassinated for their work. My childhood experiences could have easily discouraged me from going down this path, but instead they had the opposite effect. I continue to feel drawn to the darker side of the world. But I am aware that I can look at the mess from a safe and privileged place. ■

What's at Stake on the Ocean Floor

As mining companies push to extract minerals from the deep sea, nature warns us of the potential long-lasting ramifications.

BY LAUREL CHOR

It was a moment I will never forget and still can't quite get over: looking into the eyes of a humpback whale and her calf. The calf seemed curious and swam over its mother to get a better look at me. Then, before my brain could process what was happening, the two swam away.

I encountered these whales in October 2023 in the Cook Islands while filming a documentary about deep sea mining for Scripps News' "In Real Life" series. This small Pacific island nation may become one of the first countries to mine the deep sea for critical minerals, such as cobalt. Some see the ocean floor as the next frontier to exploit for materials used in technologies vital to the green energy transition. However, scientists warn that we know too little about the deep sea to understand the ramifications of these nascent mining practices. And, as battery technology and mineral recycling programs improve, experts question whether deep sea mining is necessary to combat climate change.

That day, our documentary crew and I were out at sea with Teina Rongo, a local marine biologist, and his team from Kōrero O Te `Ōrau, an organization dedicated to environmental and cultural preservation. We spotted a humpback whale swimming in shallow waters not far from shore, accompanied by her calf. I scrambled to pull on my mask, snorkel, and fins, and dove in with my heavy underwater camera setup.

I kicked my fins as hard as I could, squinting into the blue-green waters for any sign of the whales, my heart pounding. Then I saw a large, dark



shape emerge from the shadows, and big, round eyes peering at me. A deep sense of awe rushed over me. I almost forgot to bring my viewfinder to my eye.

As a photojournalist, I often have to remain laser-focused on capturing an unfolding scene, while simultaneously processing emotions of shock, disbelief, or even fear as I witness a news event from feet away, such as when I'm covering a protest or conflict. But this time I was almost

overwhelmed by the profoundness of being this close to a massive, beautiful, sentient wild being. The whales stayed with me for just a few seconds, allowing me to capture a few frames before they disappeared into the blue.

I came back to the boat and filmed Kōrero O Te `Ōrau's efforts to kill crown-of-thorns starfish, a coral-eating species that can be a normal part of the ecosystem. But excess nutrients in the water — usually from pollution caused

by human activities like agriculture — can lead crown-of-thorns populations to grow unchecked, destroying entire reefs. Rongo drew parallels between the overgrowth of crown-of-thorns and the drive to mine the deep sea: When economic development is prioritized above all else, it is often to the detriment of the ecosystems on which we all ultimately rely. To Rongo, mining the deep sea would pose an existential risk to the ecosystems vital

to their livelihoods and culture — and thus violate his people's sacred duty to protect the ocean.

As a journalist, it can be challenging to translate issues that are critical to our planet but feel distant to most audiences. How do you get people to understand the importance of habitats that are thousands of feet below sea level? The whales I saw, while not directly related to deep sea mining, served to remind the audience of what's at stake: the very

existence of the beautiful biodiversity that our planet supports.

I had the privilege of seeing these whales myself, and of feeling the deep and visceral sense of wonder and awe that such an encounter with nature can provoke. I see it as my responsibility to transmit that feeling to a wider audience, and I hope that such imagery can help to make viewers understand our connectedness with all living things, and our responsibility to this planet. ■

HUNGARY “Arm yourselves with the best lawyers who can protect you against politically motivated legal attacks and can challenge unjust regulations.” “Realize that what you are facing now is not a uniquely American problem.”

THE PHILIPPINES “Prepare for the worst. Drill it into your everyday operations. If it doesn’t happen, you’ll be happy to have been proven wrong.” “What could an autocrat want that a self-respecting independent newsroom could give?”

PERU “The journalistic quest for truth will require navigating swamps of lies, falsehoods, trumped-up legal accusations, and the danger of physical attack.” “Prompt, energetic action to prevent early erosion of press freedom will be crucial.”

GHANA “Journalists can win if they proactively counter the new Trump administration’s anticipated playbook.” “The administration will put its jackhammer into the cracks that developed in media organizations.”

INDIA “Continue the work of documenting a version of events that centers the experiences of those with the least power.” “We all need a sound mind and a healthy body if we are to outlast our oppressors.”

POLAND “Build communities around your newspapers, radio and TV stations, or online platforms. The people who read or listen to you are your allies.” “Journalists must actively defend democracy, and their weapon is the truth.”

ECUADOR “Now more than ever, strength lies in unity.” “Civil society is prepared to join the fight, so find common ground and unite.”

TURKEY “Be cognizant of the slow-burning nature of this destruction; don’t just look for big dramatic actions.” “Engage with your audiences in as many ways as you can, as earning and maintaining their trust is now more crucial than ever.”

ZIMBABWE “This new reality of a media-bashing president needs a robust response from journalists.” “Stay strong, colleagues – we need you to be strong.”