NIEMAN REPORTS

Nieman

THE CASE FOR FACTS

IN A SEA OF LIES AND MISINFORMATION, FACTS KEEP JOURNALISM AFLOAT

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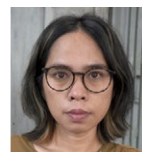
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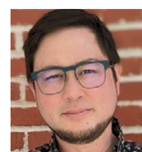
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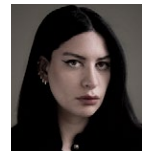
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Stacks of the Portland Press Herald in South Portland, Maine. The paper is among many outlets in the state operating in a new way.

COVER: CHRISTOPH NIEMANN TOP: GRETA RYBUS RIGHT: SAMUEL BOIVIN/NURPHOTO VIA ALAMY

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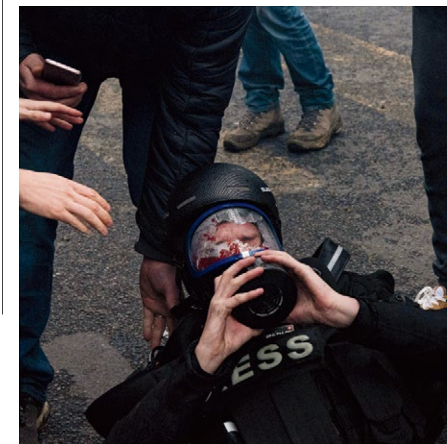

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FROM THE CURATOR

A Fidelity to Facts

Rigor is the essence of journalism

BY ANN MARIE LIPINSKI

The presidential election had a clear winner: Donald Trump. But Kamala Harris wasn't the only loser. There was another campaign fatality eulogized by the press: fact-checking.

"Last Stand of the Pinocchio," read a Slate headline on election eve. "It's time to abandon the foremost symbol of journalistic impotence in the Trump era."

Having run out of superlatives to describe Trump's persistent legacy of lies, many critics concluded that the fault was in ourselves. If fact-checking worked, his campaign would have failed or, at the least, the lies would have abated. It was a compelling argument, natural to journalists who seek results when exposing wrongdoing, not *more wrongdoing*.

"For a decade now, and with extra-special urgency amid Trump's political reemergence over the past year or so, journalists have made the same arguments, deployed the same formats, and issued the same sorts of rebuttals, all under the presumption that at some point the sheer weight of accumulated evidence *has to* break through the walls of denial that Trump's supporters have built up to shield themselves from apology and accountability," Justin Peters wrote in the Slate article. "But the breakthrough never comes. The lies keep getting worse. And the media keeps relying on methods and formats that clearly no longer suit this desperate moment."

The day after the election, I reached out to Angie Drobnic Holan, the most thoughtful person I know on these questions. When I first met Holan, she was the editor-in-chief of PolitiFact, the Pulitzer Prize-winning U.S. fact-checking site. After a year as a Nieman Fellow, she was named the director of the International Fact-Checking Network, where she now works with fact-checking operations worldwide.

I was trying to understand how journalism's Job One—the practice of verification—had lost its stature. I made the case against fact-checking. Holan had heard it before.

"It's an argument that has been made about fact-checking for a long time," she began. "I think it stems from misperceptions about journalism's purpose and capacity."

For Holan, journalism has a special role to play in a democracy—truth-seeking inquiry, more akin to the fact-finding work of courts than to that of political advocates. Some critics of fact-checked campaign coverage complained that threats of autocracy demanded an activist's stance from reporters, and criticized journalism for over-reliance on old tools that failed to convince voters. Holan wasn't buying it. "I would not assign blame to journalists," she told me. "Assign blame if you want to the Democrats who couldn't defeat him."

Holan has known colleagues for whom the rigors of fact-checking and prohibitions against advocacy have proven too restrictive and has seen journalists turn to the law or politics in order to push for specific outcomes. She understands why some find that preferable to living with the public's verdict on fact-checking: "Journalists did a really good job of showing the lies Trump told and the people said, 'we'll live with that.'"

> **"Trump is the historic table that has been set for us. If you're looking for important work, there is so much to be done."**
> **Angie Holan,** Director of the International Fact-Checking Network

ANDREW HARNIK/GETTY IMAGES

Tesla and SpaceX CEO Elon Musk, accompanied by his son, visits President Donald Trump in the Oval Office on February 11. Musk, a close Trump adviser, has echoed the president's attacks on the media, saying of "60 Minutes" journalists: "They deserve a long prison sentence."

Holan thinks the press is "in for some dark times," a prediction supported by the administration's escalating attacks on journalism, including chilling rhetoric from Elon Musk who said of "60 Minutes," "They deserve a long prison sentence." This follows news from Mark Zuckerberg that Meta was ending some long running fact-checking programs, a decision likely to swell the very misinformation the programs were designed to limit.

"I don't think that's going in the right direction," said Bill Gates, the tech mogul-turned-philanthropist, in an interview with The New Yorker editor David Remnick. Gates, whose foundation is the world's largest vaccine funder, has been a regular target of conspiracists on Zuckerberg's platforms and provided a reminder that the stakes for fact-checking transcend journalism. "The fact that I thought everybody would be doing deep analysis of facts and seeking out the actual studies on vaccine safety — boy, was that naïve," said a weary-sounding Gates.

Holan's unshakeable belief in fact-checking held echoes for me of former Nieman Curator Bill Kovach and co-author Tom Rosenstiel's writing on the essence of journalism. "In the end, the discipline of verification is what separates journalism from entertainment, propaganda, fiction, or art," they wrote. "Journalism alone is focused first on getting what happened down right."

Almost 25 years later, we asked Holan to make the case for facts in the age of Trump. You will find her elegant argument for "preserving reality itself" in these pages.

"Trump is the historic table that has been set for us," she told me in that post-election call. "If you're looking for important work, there is so much to be done." ■

LIVE@
LIPPMANN

What to Expect During Trump's Second Term – and How to Fight Back

David McCraw, The New York Times' lead newsroom lawyer, on potential legal challenges

President Donald Trump has long been a vocal critic of the press, labeling journalists as the "enemy of the people" and vowing retribution against those he considers adversaries. David McCraw, senior vice president and deputy general counsel for The New York Times and a lecturer at Harvard Law School, spoke to the current Nieman class about the challenges facing journalists as Trump begins his second term. These include tactics the administration has signaled it may use to stifle journalism, including prosecuting leakers and those who speak to reporters, as well as exploring new laws to use against the media.

McCraw is the author of the 2019 book "Truth in Our Times: Inside the Fight for Press Freedom in the Age of Alternative Facts," which includes an analysis of the legal challenges the Times faced during Trump's first term.

McCraw has worked on key cases involving the Freedom of Information Act, libel suits, press access, and other issues, and offered insights on how to push back against legal threats against the press. Edited excerpts:

On declining public support for the media

I think the thing that's concerning to me … is the breakdown of public support for the idea of freedom of press. There's been a lot of discussion of the Trump administration and freedom of speech. But the concern is, to me, simply the public buy-in on freedom of the press. … If you see the undermining of the idea of how important freedom of press is, I think it's very difficult for journalists to do what they need to do, and for those of us in courts to do what we need to do to protect that.

I did learn about freedom of press in Monticello, Illinois, which had about 3,200 people when I grew up there. … They voted reliably Republican every time, but they did believe in freedom of the press, and that's because one of the things you learned growing up in Illinois as a kid is: every governor ended up in jail. My parents and their friends and neighbors believed that maybe we would stop these politicians from stealing if we had a press that was vibrant and able to stop it. And I fear that sense, that the press is there on behalf of all of us just to hold government accountable, is an idea that we just need to give support to — I do think it has been frayed.

Right after I finished my book, there was a poll done, and they found that 26% of the people believed that the president should be allowed to shut down a news outlet that, quote, misbehaved, and whatever the Founding Fathers thought about the First Amendment, whatever they thought about press freedom, that was not it.

On the risks the press may face under Trump

I think probably the most likely change in terms of how the administration deals with the press will be that we're going to see more attempts to find out who is leaking within government, and that as a result of that, we will see more subpoenas served on the reporters.

We'll see more attempts by the government to get access to the records. I think that's pretty much a foregone conclusion. That didn't happen during the Biden administration, but [I'm] fairly certain [it] will happen during the Trump administration. I think there probably will be an uptick in libel cases. I am less concerned about that because the law has remained stable; we still have really good defenses.

> "I fear that sense, that the press is there on behalf of all of us just to hold government accountable, is an idea that we just need to give support to — I do think it has been frayed.

Those of you who are from other countries and practicing journalism in much tougher places than the United States will find this interesting: The New York Times gets sued on average two to four times a year. That's it.

So we don't see a lot of libel suits, but I do think there will be an uptick. In the last Trump administration, we went from our two-to-four average, which has been the case for years — in the last year of the presidency of Donald Trump, there were 10. There obviously was the sense that suing for libel has value to people who may oppose what they think the Times is about.

I think there's some concern about using non-media law to go after news organizations, in part just because … there are so many guardrails to protect freedom of the press. … So what we're seeing is this strange dive into consumer statutes. You may have seen President Trump sued The Des Moines Register and their main outside pollster, and it wasn't for libel; it was for consumer fraud. They printed something that wasn't untrue, and it didn't harm anybody's reputation, but [the legal argument was] it was a fraud on the good citizens of Iowa by inducing them to buy subscriptions and so forth and so on. … That should be a preposterous claim … but you do see [those kinds of cases].

On possible legal challenges to media access

Yes, access becomes a choke point for journalism. … During the pandemic, I was asked to be the keynote speaker at the ABA [American Bar Association] book awards. At that time, everybody was talking about freedom of speech online and the platforms and so forth. And I said this: Don't lose sight of the fact of how much power the government has to control the flow of information to the press. … Look at what information gets to the public, and it starts with access.

If you can't get those documents, if you have a second-rate Public Records Act, if you can't get into a press conference because somebody doesn't like what you wrote, it becomes a huge problem. I think we'll see that, as bad as the Freedom of Information Act is in this country, that it will be used to restrict the flow, not to free [the] flow of information. And it's important that people like me push back against that.

MEGAN CATTEL/NIEMAN REPORTS

New York Times lead newsroom lawyer David McCraw spoke to the current class of Nieman Fellows in January 2025.

I think you'll see the same things that you saw in the White House in the first go-around, for example, when President Trump threw [former CNN reporter] Jim Acosta out of the press briefing room.

I would say what makes me hopeful is that despite the rough run the press has had, a lot of conservatives really believe in transparency. A lot of conservatives still, like my parents were, believe that you need to know what these guys are up to. And so, [for instance,] Florida has one of the best freedom of information laws in the country.

There's this incredible case — it's making its way to the Supreme Court and out of Texas — where an [independent] reporter was arrested for asking for information from the police. She asks the police for some information about a suicide. She gets it, and then she's indicted criminally under a statute which makes it illegal to obtain government information for a profit-making purpose if you don't have the right to that information. The charges were ultimately dropped, and she sued the police on the theory that who would have thought you could be arrested for asking questions?

What makes me hopeful is that the first time that case was heard, Judge James Ho, who is probably [one of] the most conservative members of the judiciary, said, "I would assume that everybody in America knows they're allowed to ask questions in the public interest."

On legal resources for small or nonprofit newsrooms

If you look back on the cases that I cover in my [Harvard Law School] class, the cases in which freedom of the press was established — roughly between 1964 and 1989, that's really the body of cases — if you look at those news organizations that brought them whose names are on there: Press Enterprise. Press Enterprise was a fairly small newspaper in Riverside, California. Florida Star, one of the biggest cases decided by the Supreme Court. Florida Star had a circulation of 11,000. Richmond Newspapers, the single most important access case where the press won the right under the First Amendment to be present in a criminal trial — Richmond newspapers. Richmond newspapers are not a big news operation. They were bringing these cases, and you just don't see that anymore.

And for all these reasons it's concerning, because those cases, everybody's case, can help shape the law, and if it's not well-defended, then we can get law we don't really want.

The things that I think are going on that give me a little bit of hope is that there is a big move to have more nonprofit, pro bono legal help for news organizations. So there's an organization now called Lawyers for Reporters, which is exactly that. They will work with nonprofit news organizations throughout the country on a variety of legal concerns. They do that for free. That's important.

Several foundations have funded clinics at law schools all across the country. Many of them are focused on access to information. So you see all around the country again, beginning really with Yale, but now at various law schools around the country, where there are clinics that are fairly well-funded that are assisting in bringing these access cases or, in some cases, responding to threats on freedom of the press and similar issues.

So, those kinds of things are going to be helpful. But it really does cost money, and for most of these organizations, you really want them to step up.

I think it's one of the reasons why we felt, over the last 15 years, the need to really press freedom of information cases. We have 20 pending at any time against the federal government. And we see our role as that prod to the government, that if somebody's not doing that, secrecy becomes the order of the day.

I'm very proud that we filed our first FOIA case — first Freedom of Information [Act] case against the Trump administration — on 12:01 on the 21st [of January]. We did not do it on Inauguration Day, on the [Martin Luther King Jr.] holiday, but one minute after the holiday ended, we filed. ■

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Yook Kearn Wong, father of journalist Edward Wong, photographed on his high school campus in Guangzhou, China, in 1948.

COURTESY OF EDWARD WONG

A Personal Approach to China's History

Edward Wong, NF '18, on his book, "At the Edge of Empire," which explores his career and family history

Edward Wong, who grew up in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., said his father never shared much about his life in China before immigrating to the United States. Over the years, Wong initiated more conversations, learning that, as a young man, his father once enthusiastically embraced Mao Zedong's Communist revolution, dropped out of college to join the People's Liberation Army, and hoped to serve in the Chinese air force during the Korean War. He eventually grew disillusioned with Mao's regime, and made a daring escape to Hong Kong in 1962 before ultimately settling in Alexandria, Virginia.

Wong delves deeper into his father's life story in his book, "At the Edge of Empire: A Family's Reckoning With China." Tracing his family's roots in Hong Kong and southern China, Wong weaves in his own experiences as a foreign correspondent in Beijing for The New York Times from 2008 to 2016.

The idea for the book crystallized and took shape, Wong says, during his Nieman Fellowship year in 2017-18. He spoke to the current class of Nieman Fellows and Nieman Reports about combining reportage with memoir, interviewing his father over several years, and researching his family history.

This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

On the book's non-linear structure

The structure for this book was something I thought through very carefully when I was doing my proposal. It was a challenge because I knew I wanted to tell two narratives in two different timelines. One is that of my father, and mainly focused on the 12 years that he lived in the People's Republic of China. And for most of that time, he was dedicated to trying to realize Mao's vision of China. And then the other part would be from 2008 onward to now, and my own experiences and reporting in China. So how do you marry these two narratives? I did want the book to feel like there was movement through time for the reader. And I thought what I would do is to tell one of those narratives chronologically, which was my father's narrative, and my experiences in China would then be interspersed among chapters that told his story.

On the most difficult aspect of writing the book

I think one of the most difficult things to tackle was the emotional turn in [my father's] story, when he realizes that his dream of what he wanted to do in China would never be realized. He believed [there were] suspicions about him within the [Communist] Party and within the military. Partly due to structural factors within the party, he [knew] he would never win their trust the way he wanted to, combined with political forces that were at play that made him doubt the direction of the country, such as the great famine [of the late 1950s].

What did help was the fact that I found in my research process these letters that he had written to his older brother, Sam, who was living in America at the time, … letters that expressed his feelings at the time. And so reading those letters gave me a much fuller sense of the depths of disappointment that he felt.

On advice for interviewing family members

Obviously language is a big part of it. If you can speak whatever language that your family member feels most comfortable talking, then that helps a lot. … The other thing I would say, if you're trying to talk about your parents' experiences during these very dramatic moments in history, even if they're non-dramatic moments, is having a knowledge of that history is very helpful.

When I interviewed my dad in my 20s, I already had some of the foundation for that. … After working for almost a decade in China for the Times, and learning a lot more about China through my reporting, … when my father would talk about all these different beats in his life, different places he had gone, I could understand a lot more how it fit within the historical movements of the time. ■

After the Shooting Stops: Vets on the Ripple Effects of Combat

Michael Petrou, NF '18, on leading "In Their Own Voices," an oral history project about the postwar lives of Canadian veterans.

Reg Harrison, a World War II vet, is interviewed as part of the "In Their Own Voices" oral history project at the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa, Canada.

COURTESY OF THE CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM

Two summers ago, I sat down with Alex Polowin, one of a dwindling number of Second World War veterans, and asked him how he felt when the war ended. "Sad," he told me.

Polowin, who has since died, served three years in the Royal Canadian Navy. He recalled steaming into Halifax Harbour at war's end and seeing, for the first time, ships lit up because their crews no longer feared German torpedoes. Two things hit him: He survived. And he had no idea what to do next.

"The sadness wasn't because the war was over. The sadness was [because] the good times came to an end," he said. "You know, it's good, it's over, you're safe now. But what are you going to do with the rest of your life?"

I'm a former war correspondent-turned-historian at the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa. I interviewed Polowin for "In Their Own Voices," an oral history project that begins when most histories — and a lot of reporting — about war and military service end: when the fighting stops, or when soldiers take off their uniforms and wonder what they're going to do with the rest of their lives.

Over the past three years, I've interviewed more than 200 veterans and their loved ones, from centenarians who served in the Second World War to much younger returnees from Afghanistan and Iraq. I asked all of them how military service has shaped their lives. These conversations are intimate, sometimes painful, almost always revealing. They feel like journalism, just slowed down a bit.

My colleagues and I have used them to create an online exhibition. We also collaborated with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation on two one-hour radio documentaries. In the next year or so, we'll host a conference and publish a book about the veterans' experience. All interviews will be preserved and publicly available in the Canadian War Museum's archives.

Throughout this process, I have occasionally reflected on the similarities and differences between veterans and war reporters. We go to conflict zones for fundamentally different reasons but may now share the same kinds of memories. Once or twice during interviews, veterans have turned the tables on me.

"Were there any times when you were scared?" Reg Harrison, a 100-year-old Second World War veteran of the Royal Canadian Air Force, asked me.

"Yeah. Many times," I told him.

Harrison, a survivor of four plane crashes, said that when he and his crewmates flew Halifax and Lancaster bombers, they always felt safe. "I think that's what kept them going, eh?" he said, referring to his Bomber Command comrades, who suffered horrendous casualty rates.

Another difference between veterans and war correspondents concerns the ties we build among ourselves. I found myself envying the fellowship of veterans. Foreign correspondents, like veterans, see and experience things that are unique and difficult to process. But we're also solitary, competitive, and there are so few of us that it's rare for us to connect with each other and talk about it.

For veterans, becoming a civilian again can be as profound an experience as anything that happens during their military service. Nicholas Grimshaw, a decorated veteran of the Balkans and Afghanistan, likens it to crossing a bridge from one bank of a river to the next. The near bank is known and comforting; the far one is dark and you're afraid to reach it.

"But as time went on, I found that I was getting farther and farther away from the near bank and closer to the far bank," he recalled. "And building that resilience, and still being able to reflect back on the military side of the near bank and say, 'Yep, you're good, I'm good, but it's time for me to go.' And push on, and move out, and keep moving forward."

Grimshaw and Polowin both felt the weight of their transition from fighting men to civilians. They grappled with describing a journey that is integral to the veterans' experience, and therefore an elemental part of war and military service. Documenting this journey is worthwhile for journalists and historians alike. Hearing their words, and those of other veterans and their loved ones, gets us a little closer to understanding how conflict shapes everyone it touches. ■

THE STATE OF NEWS

How Maine has quietly become a laboratory for media funding experimentation

BY JON MARCUS | PHOTOS BY GRETA RYBUS

OLD-STYLE NEWSPAPER BOXES FLANK the entrance. From beyond them comes the smell of ink and newsprint. When the presses roll, the floor vibrates.

The building that houses the Portland Press Herald seems a throwback to journalism's heyday. In fact, it's part of a case study of the industry's potential future.

What happens when the outlets producing most of the news in a state become nonprofit? With little outside notice, that has quietly but steadily been taking place in Maine, New England's northernmost state.

Most of the daily and many of the weekly newspapers have come under the ownership of the National Trust for Local News, a Colorado-based nonprofit that took them over through a subsidiary called the Maine Trust for Local News. There are at least six other statewide nonprofit news organizations and one that covers the coast and islands. A growing number of Maine's independent weeklies are nonprofit, new nonprofit news sites are popping up, and nonprofit public radio is reaching farther into the corners of this second-most-rural state in the U.S.

Maine's new media ecosystem is showing how nonprofit journalism can promote collaboration, investigative reporting, and coverage of underserved groups and disparate points of view.

But it also includes examples of how nonprofit media

> “What else are you going to do? You have to look for new models, unless you want to fold your tent forever.”
>
> **NICK MILLS**
> **BOARD MEMBER, THE MAINE CENTER FOR PUBLIC INTEREST REPORTING**

can be prone to the same pitfalls as for-profit properties absorbed by corporate chains, including budget cuts and watered-down content. Critics contend that coverage is sometimes so broadly focused that it doesn't connect with local readers. Many express concerns about who's paying the bills and with what motives. And there's constant fear about the funding drying up.

Still, as almost all of Maine's media become nonprofit, there is a growing consensus — or perhaps resignation — that it represents one of the best options for newsrooms to keep running.

“What else are you going to do?” said Nick Mills, a former journalism professor at Boston University who has retired to Maine, where his father was a fishing captain. “You have to look for new models, unless you want to fold your tent forever.”

Mills is a member of the board of the Maine Center for Public Interest Reporting, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit that was founded in 2009 and that most recently has been publishing its work under the banner The Maine Monitor. Other news organizations follow the same standard 501(c)(3) model, including the Harpswell Anchor; several weeklies like the Town Line, which covers more than 20 towns in central Maine; at least three community radio stations; and a nonprofit television station.

Then there are commercial news organizations that have fiscal sponsors, meaning they associate with 501(c)(3) organizations so that donors can claim tax deductions.

The Bangor Daily News (BDN) has assembled a network of weeklies called the Maine Independent News Collaborative, and found a fiscal sponsor in the Eastern Maine Development Corp., a workforce and community development nonprofit. This simplifies the process under which the BDN — still independent and family-owned — had already been collecting contributions. Such giving remains “a small single-digit portion of our overall budget,” said Jo Easton, the News' development director. But “it helps us hold the water back.” Among the donors to the new collaborative is a foundation established by the horror writer Stephen King and his wife, Tabitha, who live in Maine.

Yet another strand of nonprofit newsrooms is being spun off from advocacy groups, including the Maine Wire, part of the right-leaning Maine Policy Institute; The Working Waterfront, operated by the nonprofit Island Institute, which serves Maine's coastal towns and islands; and Amjambo Africa!, which was created by the immigrant advocacy group Ladder to the Moon Network.

Maine's nonprofit news expansion is a ramped-up version of a trend sweeping across the U.S. The number of members of the nationwide Institute for Nonprofit News, or INN, is closing in on 500, up from about 120 in 2015. Nearly half are local, compared with 1 in 4 in 2017.

Philanthropic backing for local nonprofit journalism is also on the rise. More than half of philanthropic funders surveyed by researchers at the University of Chicago say they've increased their giving to journalism causes in the last five years. The coalition of more than 60 funders behind Press Forward, a charity founded in 2023, has pledged more than $500 million to support local news.

But nonprofit ownership is not a panacea, as the experience in Maine also demonstrates. Philanthropic funders increasingly demand that media organizations find other ways to bring in money. “‘Nonprofit’ is essentially a tax status,” said Will Nelligan, chief growth officer at the National Trust for Local News. “It is not a way to run your business.”

Nonprofits like the National Trust — which swooped in to buy the Portland Press Herald, three of Maine's four other dailies, and 16 of its weeklies — may have saved the outlets from falling under the control of the for-profit corporations that were bidding for them. But the National Trust is facing scrutiny for failing to specify where the money came from to buy the papers, and for significantly increasing the salary of its own CEO.

Still, without nonprofits “there simply wouldn't be coverage,” said J.W. Oliver, editor of the Harpswell Anchor, a weekly that closed in 2020 but was revived as a nonprofit with support from local residents and businesses.

MAINE HAS A LONG history of supporting local news. Its first newspaper started publishing before the U.S. Constitution was even drafted. By the middle of the 19th century, there were newspapers in every county, serving a widely scattered, mostly rural population of about 600,000. As in the rest of the country at the time, almost all belonged to local owners.

Unlike in the rest of the country, local ownership in Maine continued well into the 2000s. Though Portland's Press Herald was sold to The Seattle Times Company in 1998, it came back into local hands a decade later. There were almost no acquisitions by the kind of big corporations that have stripped newspapers elsewhere of their assets or shut them down. The only such instance has been Gannett's purchase of two small weeklies near the New Hampshire border.

One reason the big conglomerates have made so little headway in Maine, insiders say, is residents' antipathy toward “people from away” — among the nicer terms locals use for out-of-staters. “There is generally a skepticism to change and outsiders, and that worked out well in terms of keeping things locally owned,” said Lauren

Reade Brower, a media mogul who once owned a majority of the newspapers in Maine, sits inside The Free Press offices in Rockland in 2017. In 2023, Brower sold his media empire to the National Trust

PREVIOUS PAGE: J.W. Oliver is the editor of the Harpswell Anchor. The weekly paper, in a seaside community in Maine, had closed in 2020 but was revived as a nonprofit with support from local residents and businesses.

McCauley, editor of the nonprofit Maine Morning Star.

Then there is the lack of financial incentive. Most Maine newspapers remained locally owned because they didn't make enough money or have enough real estate to be worth buying. "Even before they were nonprofit, many Maine media outlets might as well have been," Earl Brechlin, former editor of The Bar Harbor Times, joked.

People in Maine's more isolated communities have also hung onto a strong sense of civic engagement, according to Stefanie Manning, the managing director at the Maine Trust for Local News, the subsidiary set up by the National Trust to run the Press Herald and other properties. This civic-mindedness "is what's brought us to today, and the fact that there still are so many printed newspapers all across the state," Manning said.

At a time when more than 200 counties in the rest of the U.S. — most of them rural — no longer have professional news coverage, every county in Maine still has at least some, according to the Local News Initiative at Northwestern University. Fifty-one news sites and 43 newspapers in Maine survived into the 2020s, all locally owned except for the two bought by Gannett.

These factors combined to help news outlets in Maine "hang on for a very long time," said Mark Stodder, who chairs the Maine Trust's community board. They "sort of set the stage for what we've become now" as an incubator for nonprofit journalism, added McCauley of the Maine Morning Star.

"We have an obligation as an industry to think creatively about solutions."

WILL NELLIGAN
CHIEF GROWTH OFFICER AT THE NATIONAL TRUST FOR LOCAL NEWS

Maine has also benefited from its deep well of experienced journalists, media executives, and well-heeled donors who live there or spend summers on its rocky coast and inland lakes and forests.

But it's a quirky non-journalist who has played an unlikely but outsized role in Maine becoming a crucible of nonprofit media.

Reade Brower started his career in Maine by responding to an earlier corporate threat: As big-box stores started to spring up on the fringes of small downtowns, Brower went into business creating coupon sheets for local retailers, building that into a direct-mail and printing company. Then, as family owners began to step aside, he started buying up the newspapers that used his presses.

Brower came to control all of the state's daily newspapers, except the Bangor Daily News, and more than 20 weeklies.

The self-effacing Brower, who wears Hawaiian shirts and prefers to go without shoes, said he didn't get into the newspaper business out of principle. He did it largely for the economies of scale that came with buying ink and newsprint in bulk. But he came to recognize the larger value of his journalistic properties.

"I'm not on a high horse. I just instinctively know it's important," he said, calling it "a noble industry."

The challenges besetting the industry in other parts of the U.S. also began to hit Maine. Low profit margins were worsened by declining circulation and competition from digital advertising. The number of journalists in Maine fell from 2,600 in 2001 to 722 by the first half of 2024, according to the state Department of Labor.

Stefanie Manning, managing director of the Maine Trust for Local News, at the group's South Portland office. The Maine Trust is a subsidiary set up by the National Trust for Local News to run the Portland Press Herald and other publications.

The Press Herald sold its former headquarters across from Portland's City Hall; it has since become a newspaper-themed boutique hotel with an art installation in the lobby made of old manual typewriters and tabletops decorated with laminated front pages.

The COVID-19 pandemic aggravated the industry's financial problems. A few more Maine weeklies blinked out, and newspapers got smaller and thinner, although there was also a surge in readers making unsolicited donations. In 2023, with debt to repay and no succession plan, Brower put his newspapers up for sale. When deep-pocketed private companies with histories of downsizing came sniffing around, Mainers decided to gamble on the very long odds of turning Brower's papers into nonprofit operations.

THE FIRST IMPULSE WAS to set up a nonprofit called the Maine Journalism Foundation that would attempt to raise enough money to buy Brower's holdings. The campaign was helmed by a retired Press Herald columnist, Bill Nemitz.

The union representing employees at the Press Herald and another of the dailies owned by Brower begged him to give the nascent organization time to meet its goal of raising $15 million. But outside companies were circling. Speaking on background because they were required to sign non-disclosure agreements, a number of sources with knowledge of the talks confirm that these prospective buyers included Gannett, Alden, Minnesota-based Adams Publishing Group, and David Smith, executive chairman of Sinclair Broadcast Group.

Contributions trickled into the Maine Journalism Foundation, including some from the newspapers' employees, but didn't come close to what was needed to win the "chaotic" race for ownership, Nemitz said.

At the last minute, the National Trust for Local News showed up. The organization was co-founded in 2021 by Elizabeth Hansen Shapiro, who laid out its modus operandi in a paper she co-authored as a research fellow at Harvard University's Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy: Rather than pump money into newsrooms, the trust would acquire them outright, using a pool of money big enough to compete with for-profit buyers (initially around $300 million, Shapiro has suggested). The organization had already bought

two dozen newspapers on Colorado's front range, and would soon add 18 more in Georgia.

Brower took the National Trust's offer, settling for less than what he said he could have gotten for the papers from the for-profit companies. He felt confident that the trust wasn't "going to cut their way to prosperity" as other bidders might. "If you can find a better model, do it. But this was the best one I could find," he said.

Nemitz transferred the money his foundation had collected to the National Trust to be used toward the purchase. But relief over the group's intervention, for him and some others in Maine, proved short-lived.

With their suspicion of "people from away," Mainers started scrutinizing the National Trust's purchase — starting with who paid for it, which the Trust repeatedly promised to disclose when the acquisition closed in 2023, but still hasn't.

The news website Semafor reported that some of the money came from liberal billionaire donors George Soros and Hansjörg Wyss.

"They're doing themselves a disservice by failing the basic authenticity test" and not specifying who put up the money to buy the Maine Trust's newspapers, said Steven Robinson, editor of the Maine Wire, which has taken to calling those papers "Soros-backed" and "far-left content publishers." Robinson's own outlet receives money from conservative judicial activist Leonard Leo, Semafor reported.

Nelligan, the National Trust's chief growth officer and also a Maine native, called this "a manufactured controversy." All of the money for the Maine papers went through the National Trust, he said. "There isn't one funder or two funders [alone] that funded this acquisition." At least one Maine donor has asked not to be named, Nelligan added.

Like much else that has been criticized, the funding question is complicated by the Maine Trust's little-understood, unusual structure. While the National Trust for Local News is a conventional 501(c)(3) nonprofit, the Maine Trust has yet another tax designation. It's an L3C, or low-profit limited liability company. In short, it's a for-profit subsidiary of a nonprofit, still expected to make enough to pay for all or most of its own operations.

Many financial supporters of nonprofit journalism are pushing sustainability like this, seeing their role as "seeding good work that gets its legs and prospers," as Rick Edmonds, media business analyst at the Poynter Institute, writes. More than half of funders say their goal is to help grantees develop sustainability, according to a survey by Media Impact Funders.

The National Trust's approach is to use philanthropy to buy newsrooms and invest in "transformation," paying for consultants to propose cost-cutting and revenue-producing measures — but not to cover day-to-day costs. It's also centralizing business functions such as employee benefits and purchasing to realize economics of scale.

That's not what many Mainers say they were expecting. Some complain that this centralization of back-office roles, along with the sharing of content, marks the beginning of a loss of local control, which they liken to what Gannett and the hedge funds do.

> "Collaboration is built into the ethos of nonprofit media. It helps us be more efficient about telling more stories."
>
> **JONATAHAN KEALING**
> **CHIEF NETWORK OFFICER AT THE INSTITUE FOR NONPROFIT NEWS**

"They're building a chain," Cliff Schechtman, the Press Herald's former executive editor, fumed. "They're no different than any other chain ownership, with the exception of a tax exemption."

But even in its weakened state, journalism "is still a $20 billion industry," Nelligan responded. "And if you think philanthropy can replace that dollar for dollar, I've got a bridge to sell you. We have an obligation as an industry to think creatively about solutions."

The plethora of nonprofit news organizations in Maine also raises the broader concern that there may not be enough money to pay for it there or elsewhere. Nonprofit journalism organizations across the country say the philanthropy they're getting falls far short of what they need.

Another lesson from Maine, said Megan Gray, an arts reporter at the Press Herald and president of the News Guild of Maine — which represents employees at the Press Herald and the Central Maine Morning Sentinel — is that "nonprofit ownership doesn't automatically fix the problems in the industry, and one of those problems is pay." Several freelance columnists at the Press Herald have been let go.

The journalism produced by the nonprofits in Maine is being closely watched. In particular, critics have pounced on something Shapiro, who stepped down as the National Trust's CEO in January, once wrote — that "a focus on building communities through quality local news may mean giving as much space to covering the high school's winning team or a local restaurant's grand opening as to an accountability investigation of the local school board."

Schechtman, the former Press Herald executive editor, said the Maine Trust papers' news output is "getting softer and softer." He cited a New Year's Day feature in the Press Herald about children's hopes for 2025.

Nelligan said there's room for both hard and soft news, and that "one of those things gives us the revenue to do the other."

There's an equal and opposite concern that larger statewide nonprofit newsrooms are investing their resources in months-long investigative projects that don't necessarily connect with readers' primary concerns.

Tom Groening, editor of The Working Waterfront and a veteran reporter, cited a Maine Monitor story about wealthy summer residents near Bar Harbor trying to block affordable housing. Although the story was well-reported, Groening said, "it doesn't help the single mother who wants to know what's going to happen to her kid's school."

That's not the Maine Monitor's job, Micaela Schweitzer-Bluhm, its executive director, responded. "We're really clear that we're not a daily newspaper and we're not hyper-local." The nonprofit exists to do the in-depth investigative journalism that newspapers have a harder time affording these days. And much of it "is very directly linked to people's lives," Schweitzer-Bluhm added.

In the Maine Press Association's most recent annual journalism contest, the winners included an investigative report that showed how the state's judiciary had closed off public online access to most court documents, citing security concerns; another that revealed part-time, elected probate judges were approving guardianship agreements but failing to monitor them; and yet another that exposed how county jails were recording supposedly confidential attorney-client phone calls. All three were produced by nonprofit outlets.

Rural, independent papers have struggled to keep up with delivery options. A lone newspaper box sits among mailboxes.

"The average Mainer still gets a lot of good information about what's happening here," the Maine Morning Star's McCauley said. The journalism generally "feels healthier than [in] other states."

Nonprofit support also appears to increase collaboration. The Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University in New Jersey has tracked more than 1,160 collaborative journalism projects since 2018, many involving nonprofit partners. The Portland Press Herald, now under the umbrella of the National Trust for Local News, teamed up with Maine Public on 2024 election coverage and on a one-year retrospective of the fatal shootings of 18 people at a bar and bowling alley in Lewiston. The Bangor Daily News worked with ProPublica on a story about high eviction rates from public housing.

"Collaboration is built into the ethos of nonprofit media," said Jonathan Kealing, chief network officer at the Institute for Nonprofit News. "It helps us be more efficient about telling more stories."

According to Schweitzer-Bluhm, the ultimate lesson from Maine is that whatever the shortcomings or complexities of nonprofit journalism, "there's no future of journalism that does not include philanthropic support. There's no going back." ■

FROM THE BATTLEFIELD TO THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL

How safety training for journalists has evolved

BY JOEL SIMON

Last year, I was invited to attend The New York Times' Adversarial Reporting Training, a four-day course designed to teach reporters how to stay safe in precarious situations. Known as ART School, the training takes place at a giant photo studio in Brooklyn's bustling DUMBO neighborhood and includes lessons on conducting risk assessments, minimizing the threat of online harassment, and negotiating protests that turn violent. We practiced dragging weighted dummies across the floor — while being pelted with nerf balls — to simulate transporting a wounded colleague. And we were taught how to change a flat tire and apply tourniquets.

Experienced conflict reporters and freelancers who cover dangerous assignments made up a sizeable portion of attendees. But during the two sessions I attended, there were also some unexpected participants — a political reporter caught up in the January 6 Capitol riot; several reporters for The Athletic, the sports vertical; and Guy Trebay, who covers men's fashion for the Times.

Some of the scenarios we gamed out during the training involved assignments that might traditionally be perceived as dangerous. We considered the risks of investigating a Russian government-run doping program, covering a political rally, deploying to a hurricane sweeping through the American South, and traveling to cover a mining strike in the remotest part of the Peruvian Andes. But other scenarios were surprising — assignments like reviewing a Nicki Minaj album (she's known to have a short fuse and her fans are passionate); covering the NCAA Final Four (sports fans can also be passionate); and a scenario proposed by Trebay, which involved a protest by animal rights activists at a fashion show. Through our risk assessment process, we identified ways to manage each situation — making sure we identified exits, had backup communication, and secured local contacts who could provide support in an emergency.

Later, Trebay told me that his made-up scenario was based on an incident that occurred during Paris Fashion Week in 2023. He recalled that a massive crowd swarmed the Palais de Tokyo, surging and pushing, to catch a glimpse of K-pop star Lisa from the girl group Blackpink, who was attending the Celine show — and is known to attract fervent fans. "I'm no fraidy cat," said Trebay, who covered the 1989 Romanian Revolution and the first Iraq War in 1990. "But this was genuinely scary."

Safety training and the broader protocols to protect journalists have undergone a complete transformation because of a shift in how many newsrooms think about and manage risk. The concept of safety training first emerged to support journalists working in active conflict zones, with a focus on those facing the threat of kidnapping. Today many safety courses are intended to help journalists manage a level of ambient risk — both physical and online — that has become a reality across the United States, particularly during a contentious and polarizing election, and the rest of the globe. Legal threats are mounting, and online harassment is now a routine part of covering the politics beat. Reporting on street demonstrations is particularly fraught. More than 500 journalists were assaulted, harassed, and arrested by police while covering the social justice protests that exploded across the country in 2020, following the murder of George Floyd. More than 30 reporters, including student journalists, experienced similar treatment while covering the pro-Palestinian protests on college campuses in the spring of 2024.

As the former executive director of the Committee to Protect Journalists, I helped develop resources and training to support journalists covering war. And while the risk to conflict reporters remains acute — as the unprecedented tally of journalists killed in Gaza makes plain — it's now also clear the need to support every journalist and every newsroom, along with journalism students. In a climate in which even the most seemingly benign assignments can suddenly turn dangerous, safety is everybody's business.

PREVIOUS PAGE: A man is restrained after shoving members of the media during a rally for President Donald Trump at the El Paso County Coliseum in El Paso, Texas, on February 11, 2019.

ERIC GAY/AP

SCREENSHOT VIA CNN

Six months after completing a safety course called Reporters Instructed in Saving Colleagues (RISC), journalist James Foley went missing in 2012 while reporting in Syria. It later emerged he had been taken hostage by the Islamic State, shown here in a screenshot of a video they released of his execution.

II

There has always been risk associated with international reporting from conflict zones and repressive societies where the press can't operate freely. Journalists in the field were expected to manage their own safety, using their wits, their judgment, and the visibility they enjoyed as members of the international media. That changed in early 2002, when Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl was kidnapped and later murdered by al-Qaida militants while reporting in Pakistan. It marked a turn in the relationship between Islamic militants and the media. Osama bin Laden had cultivated Western journalists and occasionally granted interviews. Now members of the media were targets. A wave of kidnappings ensued, from Afghanistan to Iraq. Many of them involved journalists from prominent outlets, including Christian Science Monitor reporter Jill Carroll, kidnapped in Iraq in 2006, and New York Times correspondent David Rohde, taken hostage in Afghanistan two years later. (Carroll was released after nearly three months in captivity; Rohde and an Afghan colleague escaped their captors after being held for seven months.)

The spate of hostage taking on the front line of the War on Terror forced many news organizations to adapt. Safety training courses for journalists have been around since the Bosnia conflict in the 1990s, but in the face of mounting risk, including the risk of kidnapping, news organizations began offering more structured workshops.

A journalist is wounded after a projectile shattered their face shield during a protest in Paris on November 16, 2019. According to experts, journalists across the globe are facing increasing risks in covering political rallies and protests.

SAMUEL BOIVIN/NURPHOTO VIA ALAMY

They also brought on outside advisors to work with reporting teams and implement new safety protocols. It was not always a comfortable fit, and some journalists chafed at the new bureaucracy. For a journalist "the most important thing is the story, to bear witness," said Mark Grant, a leading media safety expert who has worked for CNN, BBC, and Sky News and today serves as AP's vice president for Global Safety, Risk and Resilience. "A private security company needs to keep people safe."

HEFAT courses — an acronym for Hostile Environment and First Aid Training — exploded to meet the demand. The typical HEFAT offered in the 2000s was usually taught by a British combat veteran, often one who had served in the Balkans or Northern Ireland. The curriculum was heavy on first aid but also covered situational awareness in a combat environment — how to navigate a minefield and take cover in a firefight. They often included a mock kidnapping replete with rough handling, hoods placed over the heads of participants, and guns flashed around. Many journalists I have spoken to over the years who underwent the training found it eye opening and valuable, but also terrifying and at times traumatic.

The HEFAT courses were expensive and catered to staff reporters working for major news organizations with sizable budgets for travel and training. But following the Arab Spring, a new challenge emerged. Freelancers were few and far between in Afghanistan and Iraq because getting to the front line was difficult and costly. The conflicts that erupted in Egypt, Libya, and later Syria were more accessible to independent journalists — and were incredibly dangerous. Despite the risks, news organizations that had scaled back their international bureaus in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis increasingly relied on freelancers for front-line reporting.

In April 2011, a group of journalists were hit with fragments from an artillery shell while reporting on the siege of Misrata, Libya. Noted photojournalist and documentarian Tim Hetherington died from blood loss stemming from an arterial wound. In response, Hetherington's friend, writer, and filmmaker Sebastian Junger, established a new organization called Reporters Instructed in Saving Colleagues, or RISC. The RISC course focused on battlefield first aid. (I served on the board.) Because of Junger's prominence and passion, RISC attracted a huge amount of media attention. Among the freelance journalists who enrolled was James Foley, who had been captured by Libyan forces in April 2011 and imprisoned for 44 days.

Six months after completing the RISC training, Foley went missing in November 2012 while reporting in Syria. It was not until the spring of 2014 that it became clear he had been taken hostage by an emerging militant group called the Islamic State. In August, Foley was beheaded on videotape. Two weeks later, a second American journalist, Steven Sotloff was also executed.

Over this decade of shifting risk, CPJ adapted to meet the needs of journalists on the front line. In 2012, we published a comprehensive journalist security guide authored by Frank Smyth, an investigative journalist who later went on to establish his own safety training firm. The guide covered everything from what protective gear to pack for a conflict zone to which insurance to purchase. We created an Emergency Response Team, which grew to become the Emergencies Department, combining direct assistance and safety support. We prepared a series of video training modules on first aid. We brought on leading safety expert Colin Pereira, who helped lead the high-risk team at the BBC, to support our emergency response work. In 2015, another organization called ACOS, for A Culture of Safety, was formed to offer training and other resources to freelance journalists working in high-risk environments.

Despite these efforts, we kept hearing from freelancers who felt they were being asked to bear the brunt of covering the riskiest stories without adequate support, equipment, or training. One organization in particular was the source of constant anger and scorn — VICE News. Freelancers told us that the culture of the organization demanded that they take extreme risks and paid them too little and too late, causing them to skimp on basic safety. In April 2014, VICE correspondent Simon Ostrovsky was taken hostage by pro-Russian militants while reporting on the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. (He was released after three days.) The following year, Mohammed Rasool, a Kurdish journalist who was part of a VICE reporting team, was arrested by Turkish authorities and held for more than four months in a maximum security prison. The two incidents served as a wake-up call for VICE. In 2016, they brought on Sharbil Nammour, a Canadian-Lebanese lawyer and safety risk management expert, to start up a safety program adapted to the VICE culture.

III

When the Syrian Revolution erupted in 2011, the Turkish border city of Gaziantep became a staging area for journalists and aid workers, and a cadre of security experts tasked with keeping them safe. One of them was Jason Reich. In 2012, he founded his own security firm, Collective Security Project. A year later, BuzzFeed joined his client roster.

BuzzFeed News, the digital startup led by Ben Smith, was expanding rapidly and going head-to-head with larger and more established news organizations, deploying reporters to cover the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. Reich's

EVERYONE HAS TO DEAL WITH ONLINE HARASSMENT, WHICH I THINK IS AN EXISTENTIAL THREAT TO OUR PROFESSION. ITS WHOLE AIM IS TO SHUT US UP, TO DRIVE US OUT OF JOURNALISM, TO MAKE US SCARED, TO GET US TO SELF-CENSOR.

MIKE CHRISTIE, FORMER SECURITY SPECIALIST FOR REUTERS

services were fairly traditional: Risk assessments, tracking and monitoring of reporting teams, and crisis management. But he was able to take advantage of changes in technology, using electronic devices to monitor reporters in the field. He was also able to use Twitter (now X) and other social media platforms to gain access to unprecedented amounts of firsthand information, including communications from belligerents bragging about their exploits, eyewitness accounts from the victims, and posts from journalists describing their reporting. "The corporate OSINT universe exploded," recalled Reich, using the acronym for Open Source Intelligence. While Reich saw a huge benefit from tapping into the burgeoning social networks for on the ground information, he later felt conflicted because when it came to his media clients, he was often regurgitating back to them the information that journalists themselves were already posting.

In 2015, Reich moved to New York to take on a new position at BuzzFeed as the head of global security. When Reich got to the U.S. and began spending time in the newsroom, he came to believe that the distinction between international coverage and domestic reporting from a risk perspective was artificial. There were challenges in both environments that were merging and evolving. Covering natural disasters — like Hurricane Harvey, which hit Texas in 2017, and the Camp Fire that swept through California killing 85 people the following year — could be just as dangerous as a conflict deployment. Organized campaigns of online harassment intended to inflict emotional harm and generate fear were becoming increasingly common. In a notorious example from 2016, David French, then an opinion writer for National Review and today with the Times, was deluged with vile Tweets including images showing his seven-year-old daughter in a gas chamber in response to a column criticizing the alt-right.

At BuzzFeed, Reich and his team sought to build an internal "safety culture" and to develop a training regimen that reflected this philosophy. At the heart of their

ABED ZAGOUT/ANADOLU VIA GETTY IMAGES

Reba Khalid al-Ajami, a reporter for TRT Arabi, reports in Gaza alongside a colleague in February 2024. As a Palestinian journalist and a mother of four, she says she faces immense risks working in a warzone to provide for her family.

approach was Reich's belief that risk assessments conducted by security experts often relied heavily on media reports. What if the risk assessment process could be demystified, and started not with a bureaucratic form full of tick boxes, but as a conversation between an editor and a reporter? What if the role of the security expert was not to oversee the process, but to make sure the right questions were being raised? What if the first question a journalist asked in assessing risk was, "Who am I and how will I be perceived?" — putting identity at the heart of the process. Baking these questions in would help support a diverse newsroom working in a shifting environment while breaking down resistance to the idea that reporters and editors have a responsibility when it comes to safer reporting.

Reich and his team began tweaking the training at BuzzFeed, moving away from the standard HEFAT and developing a new safety course. They eliminated advanced medical interventions — like how to treat a sucking chest wound — focusing instead on teaching a few life-saving skills, like applying a tourniquet or a pressure bandage. (Reich came to believe that providing advanced medical training in such a setting is probably a waste of time and potentially dangerous because most interventions are too complicated to be adequately taught in the limited time available.) They introduced modules on digital security, emotional well-being, and covering civil unrest; they also greatly expanded access to the staff. It was reporters at BuzzFeed who suggested the new name — ART School.

Meanwhile, at VICE, Nammour underwent a similar process. When he came on board in 2016 as the head of global security, he found that the organization had begun recognizing safety concerns and supporting journalists on assignments conventionally perceived as high-risk, like deployments in Iraq and Syria. But what about the young BIPOC reporter out all night covering a Brooklyn rave? No one saw this as particularly dangerous.

Nammour set up structures to address this disparity. His approach was to embed in the newsroom the six-person security team, which included Ramy Ghaly, a former Marine combat medic, who had worked on safety protocols at CPJ. Members were deployed on assignments alongside journalists, and their role was to support the reporting process while reducing risk, whether the assignment was in a refugee camp in Syria or a bowling alley in Queens. "We were the physical embodiment of the risk assessment throughout that process," Nammour explained. Members of the safety team worked side by side with the production teams, sometimes assisting by hauling cameras and other equipment in the field.

Like Reich, Nammour moved away from reliance on HEFAT courses and began training for a median level of risk. But his approach to training was based less on instruction and more on scenarios. For example, rather than simply inviting a lawyer to discuss the First Amendment rights of journalists at protests, Nammour would have half the class play the role of police dressed in full riot gear defending a medical tent being attacked by protesters. The rest of the class played a group of journalists trying to get an injured colleague through the police line. Sirens wailed and both sides were pelted with water bottles. This exercise, in Nammour's mind, was less about building tactical skills and more about modeling the kind of emotional resilience necessary to making informed decisions under stress. The training sessions were open to freelance journalists.

As startups, VICE and BuzzFeed had certain advantages over more traditional media companies with established infrastructure and protocols. But changes were underway across the industry. In January 2014, Mike Christie was appointed general manager of global logistics and security, a new position at Reuters. "I thought 80% of my job was to look after the Olympics and the World Cups and have fun at the special events and that security would be a small addendum to it," Christie told me. "But it became apparent pretty quickly that actually it was 90% of the job, if not more." As the former Baghdad bureau chief for Reuters, Christie had an acute awareness of the safety needs of front-line journalists. Seven Reuters journalists had been killed in Iraq, Christie recalled, and "they were tragedies that hit us really hard." But there was a sense, one that troubled him, that such deaths were an inevitable cost of covering war. More than half of the journalists killed had never been given safety training, he added.

Christie quickly revamped security training and to bring it on to two tracks — one focused on everyday challenges like covering protests, protecting information, and emotional preparedness, a two-day course that Christie described as a kind of ART School equivalent, and another focused on working in a range of extreme environments, from floods to combat. Participants practiced running in a flak jacket and "sleeping rough" in a hammock or a sleeping bag, an essential survival skill in an environment with no hotel to retreat to.

The different approaches at VICE, BuzzFeed, and Reuters show how important a news organization's internal culture is to the execution of its safety strategy. At Reuters, where speed is part of the DNA, Christie had to overcome concerns that risk assessments would slow down the process, which they sometimes did. But Christie forged ahead.

OUTSIDE OF THE MAJOR NEWS ORGANIZATIONS, THERE IS LITTLE SAFETY AWARENESS OR INFRASTRUCTURE AT A TIME WHEN MANY NEWS ORGANIZATIONS ARE CUTTING RESOURCES.

"Every journalist in Paris needs this training because the protests are so violent there," Christie explained. "Everybody in Japan needed the training because hey, you could have a massive earthquake and a tsunami and a nuclear emergency on Tokyo's doorsteps. Everyone has to deal with online harassment, which I think is an existential threat to our profession. Its whole aim is to shut us up, to drive us out of journalism, to make us scared, to get us to self-censor. So, it affects not just a journalist who's in the Philippines, but a journalist writing about cryptocurrency or pop stars. And information security is more than just online harassment. It's also defending your sources and defending your information from insidious attacks that come at us all the time through our computers, through our emails, through our phones. And then of course, Covid hit, just reinforcing that every single journalist was in danger."

Ultimately, Christie believed, the key to the culture change at Reuters was bringing the general managers into the discussion around safety. "They didn't have a veto as such, but they needed to know about dangerous things that were going on, and needed to be able to weigh in," said Christie, who left Reuters at the end of 2023. "The industry as a whole was making those same moves."

IV

There was also of course another factor in the shifting risk environment in the United States, unrelated to hurricanes and wildfires. During his 2016 presidential campaign, Donald Trump made attacks on the media an essential part of his message, using his rallies to single out the reporters in the press pen, who he described as corrupt and lazy. Once inaugurated as president, Trump continued to lash out at critical journalists and occasionally deny them access to press conferences and White House briefings. He called "the fake news media" the "true

WHAT IF THE RISK ASSESSMENT PROCESS COULD BE DEMYSTIFIED, AND STARTED NOT WITH A BUREAUCRATIC FORM FULL OF TICK BOXES, BUT AS A CONVERSATION BETWEEN AN EDITOR AND A REPORTER? WHAT IF THE ROLE OF THE SECURITY EXPERT WAS NOT TO OVERSEE THE PROCESS, BUT TO MAKE SURE THE RIGHT QUESTIONS WERE BEING RAISED?

enemy of the people." The rhetorical attacks changed the dynamics for journalists interacting with Trump supporters, who often refused to speak with reporters from outlets they disliked. Threats became more common — sometimes delivered by phone, but in at least one instance via a pipe bomb sent to CNN.

Online as well, the environment for journalists became increasingly toxic. Journalists who criticized Trump — particularly those that the president singled out for scorn — were besieged with harassing messages, often laced with racist and misogynistic language. Some contained explicit threats to reporters or their families. Journalists were also victims of doxxing, or the publication of personal information, such as a home address or phone number.

Some journalists, who had been encouraged by their news organization to develop an online presence and promote their work, were angered by the lack of response from their employers to campaigns of systematic online harassment. But news organizations were not always sure what to do, other than monitoring social media in case the harassment became a threat in the real world. They had limited success engaging with social media companies or getting them to remove harassing posts. They were also vulnerable because, as institutions committed to free speech, they didn't want to be seen as attempting to censor the voices of others. And the demands from the newsrooms were often impossible to reconcile. Journalists who had built their own brands online did not want managers telling them what they could or could not post. But they did want them to step in and defend them when things got out of hand.

One thing news organizations could do was train their reporters on how to manage and mitigate online harassment. Many brought in outside experts, including trainers from Freedom of the Press Foundation and PEN America to offer workshops that covered strategies for reducing the personal information available online, documenting abuse, and blocking unwanted content. News organizations also expanded resources for responding to stress and building resilience based on presentations and workshops from the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma at Columbia, including guidance for journalists and editors exposed to traumatic imagery.

Their training emphasized that there were certain practical steps that journalists and news organizations could take — such as using an online service like DeleteMe to scrub personal information from the Internet. But they also needed to prepare themselves emotionally for the inevitable onslaught.

In April 2019, Reich left BuzzFeed and joined The New York Times. (Today, he's the vice president of safety and security for the organization.) He took ART School with him and kept the training running throughout the pandemic. In May 2020, following the murder of George Floyd by police officers in Minneapolis, street protests erupted across the country. Journalists seeking to cover them faced systematic attacks. In total, nearly 130 journalists were arrested or detained in 2020, and hundreds more were assaulted, 80% at the hands of law enforcement, according to the U.S. Press Freedom Tracker. Reporters of color were especially vulnerable in the streets, and they were also sometimes traumatized by the story they were covering, observing their own communities under siege. Then, following Biden's election victory in November, came the Jan. 6 Capitol riot, in which journalists were targeted and assaulted by the crowd, and media equipment was destroyed.

In October 2021, The New York Times hired Maria Salazar-Ferro as director of newsroom safety and resilience. "The job was created because of the protests and the election and how the environment for journalists in the U.S. changed," Salazar-Ferro, a former colleague from CPJ, told me. The Times also invested in new personal protective equipment specifically tailored to protest coverage and brought on a news security manager Eric Jones, with a background in law enforcement. Jones occasionally accompanies reporters in the field.

The national and politics desks now routinely use risk assessments, Salazar-Ferro said. The safety team has worked with reporters covering everything from hurricanes and floods, to protests and demonstrations, to sex clubs in Brooklyn and Black surfers in Queens. In preparation for the 2024 presidential election, the team has created an overarching risk assessment, looking at both the physical and online environments. Following the July 13 assassination attempt against former President Trump, the Times stepped up threat monitoring on behalf of dozens of reporters, editors, audio producers and support staff it deployed to the Republican National Convention in Milwaukee. This included tracking online chatter. No serious threats were detected. The Times' security team used the same process to prepare for the Democratic National Convention, which took place in late August in Chicago, where thousands of protestors gathered to denounce the administration's handling of the invasion of Gaza.

Outside the U.S., the Times takes a different approach, said David McCraw, the lead newsroom lawyer who oversees the four-person high-risk team that works with journalists and reporting teams covering conflict or operating in highly repressive environments. Decision-making is guided by security memos generated by the reporter and assessed by editors who evaluate risk relative to the value of the story. The Times requires reporters operating in a high-risk environment to undergo a HEFAT. Aside from the tactical training, the main benefit of such courses McCraw believes is "they focus the mind. We're not playing games here. Bad things can happen."

At the same time, McCraw had continued to observe a melding of domestic and international threats, pointing to the doxxing of reporter Natalie Kitroeff by former Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador in February. After Kitroeff reported that U.S. law enforcement officials were investigating ties between key allies of the president and leaders of the drug cartels, López Obrador made public Kitroeff's personal cell number during his morning press conference. "They're learning from each other, the bad actors," McCraw said.

V

With the elections and Israel's invasion of Gaza as the backdrop, Reich and I organized in November 2023 a Safety Summit at the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at CUNY, where I direct the Journalism Protection Initiative. We invited top safety people from about a dozen leading U.S. news organizations. Our goal was two-fold. First, we wanted guidance on how safety should be taught to journalism students as part of our effort to develop a safety curriculum at the Newmark School. The second was to host a frank conversation among leading safety professionals about the state of the industry and current best practices. Following the summit, we distributed a survey to participants.

The results confirmed that news organizations increasingly have a domestic focus in their safety training. Of the 12 news organizations that responded to the survey — which included magazines, news sites, and several broadcast networks — all but one offered some sort of training. About a third of them implemented training following the 2016 elections. Covering civil unrest and managing digital security were the most common training sessions offered. Only around half offered training on hostage survival. An increasing number of organizations now also offer training online, not just in person. One interesting finding is that there is no uniform structure for managing risk. Some news organizations have a specialized security expert on staff, while in others, the safety efforts were led by top editors or general counsels. In many instances, responsibility for safety was shared, generally between newsroom leaders and safety specialists.

But in the broader landscape, there are alarming gaps. The demise of BuzzFeed News, which shut down in April 2023, and VICE News, which effectively ceased operations in February 2024, is a huge blow to safety, Salazar-Ferro told me. "They were such innovators and so good," Salazar-Ferro said. "The best thing was how willing they were to share and how much they wanted to engage with everyone and to open their training to freelancers."

Outside of the major news organizations, there is little safety awareness or infrastructure at a time when many news organizations are cutting resources, particularly for support staff. Many local news organizations are simply unequipped to cover the violent protests in their communities, should they occur. A number of nonprofit organizations have stepped in to address the gaps, including Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, which has increased pro bono legal support for local media, and the International Women's Media Foundation which has launched a program they are calling the News Safety Across America. Nadine Hoffman, who is directing that effort, told me that the IWMF involvement in safety training began about a decade ago and focused on high-risk reporting and the particular challenges faced by female reporters.

Over time, the program has evolved, and while they still offer HEFAT courses for journalists, they have also developed specialized training for U.S. reporters that is made available regardless of gender. To maximize the number of journalists reached, the IWMF has stripped the curriculum down to a single day, focused on basic safety skills like carrying out risk assessments. First aid has been eliminated. Courses have been conducted in a number of swing states, including Arizona, Georgia, Wisconsin, Texas, and North Carolina. So far, they've trained more than 500 journalists.

There are many strategies that can be employed in a low-resources environment, according to the safety experts I spoke with. For Reich, it's all about fostering a safety culture, something newsroom leaders can do by creating processes and appropriate accountability. "If you can have a seminar, if you can have a meeting that lasts for two hours where you just did a risk assessment with all the right people in the room, that would get you somewhere," Reich told me. Once you have a process to identify risk there are a wide range of resources available online for free from organizations ranging from CPJ, to RCFP, and the Freedom of the Press Foundation that can help with mitigation strategies, he said.

Reinforcing the culture of safety is also Reich's goal at the Times. "My work here has just been really thinking about implementation and operationalizing," Reich told me. "That's what I look at as my success." In that effort, he has gained at least one important ally: Guy Trebay. Since completing ART School, Trebay says he has become a safety evangelist in the newsroom. "We're in a different world," Trebay told me. "These are skills everyone should have." ■

CAGED BIRD

The arrest of prominent Cambodian journalist Mech Dara sends a chilling warning about press freedom

BY BOPHA PHORN

Phchum Ben, a popular 15-day festival in Cambodia, is a time when people gather with their families to honor their ancestors. Dressed in traditional Khmer clothing, they bring meals to pagodas where monks chant and pray. Some, hoping for luck and good health, release birds into the sky as they make a wish.

During a recent Phchum Ben celebration, however, the reality for Mech Dara, one of Cambodia's best-known investigative journalists, was the opposite of that of those free-flying birds: he was headed for a metal cage.

Dara had been on his way home from celebrating the festival last September with relatives in Sihanoukville province — a popular coastal tourism area where his investigative reporting has exposed the inner workings of global scam operations — when he was surrounded by vehicles, many of them unmarked, and swarmed by officers. Screaming orders at him, they pulled him from his car, handcuffed him, and slapped him with an arrest warrant for "incitement" with the intent of causing public disorder.

While friends and family frantically searched for him for more than 20 hours, Dara was locked in a cell. "I did not sleep," he recalled. "I just stared at the handcuffs they [had] locked to the metal bar."

A WARNING FOR JOURNALISTS

Dara's arrest was viewed by supporters as a warning to journalists in Cambodia, where experts say a once-free, independent press has been in decline, increasingly stifled by an authoritarian government that continues to tighten its grip on the small Southeast Asian country.

"Dara is a frontline investigative journalist whose stories over the last decade have uncovered corruption, environmental destruction, and human trafficking at scam compounds across the country, and has consistently pushed for accountability and justice," said a joint statement by more than 45 human rights groups demanding Dara's release. "The arrest … is a clear attempt to intimidate and silence him and other journalists in a country where press freedoms are routinely curtailed."

The government filed charges against Dara for social media posts they claimed were "spreading fake news" for the purpose of "incitement." Friends had warned him to be careful of the tone of his posts, which sometimes included sarcastic observations about public figures or, in this case, the re-sharing of a photo. Arrests were on the rise, they warned, not only of journalists, but of political opponents, activists, or anyone critical of the government.

"The Cambodian government regularly targets journalists and independent media outlets that publish information critical [of] its policies," Aleksandra Bielakowska, the Asia-Pacific Advocacy Manager of Reporters Without Borders (RSF), said via email. "Meanwhile, numerous journalists have been targeted with abusive legal proceedings."

RSF's World Press Freedom Index ranked Cambodia 151st out of 180 countries in 2024, "placing it in the category of nations where threats to press freedom are deemed 'very serious,'" according to the report.

A spokesman for the Ministry of Justice, Dyna Seng, said that criticism of the government's treatment of the press — whether from individuals or international organizations, including RSF — is aimed at harming the Cambodian government's reputation.

"The allegations made by a small number of extremist opposition groups are baseless, and composed of slanderous characterizations to smear the government for political gain," Seng said.

Seng also said the arrests and convictions of any opposition party members, activists, or journalists — including in Dara's case — occurred because they had violated Cambodian laws, not because they were targeted.

"In a society governed by the rule of law, whether it's Cambodia or any other country, the exercise of the individual's right must be done in accordance with the conditions set by law," Seng said.

But Dara's supporters say there is little doubt he was targeted for his groundbreaking work exposing global, multibillion-dollar virtual currency investment and online schemes, as well as documenting the illicit online scam centers that have gained a strong foothold in Cambodia.

Experts say these kinds of operations have been wreaking havoc in the country since emerging in the mid-2010s, when an influx of Chinese investors in Sihanoukville province and other areas led to a proliferation of new construction of large-scale scam compounds and casinos.

Dara has continued to relentlessly expose the powerful people who get rich off the schemes, the political corruption that enables them, and the victims who are trafficked to staff these huge operations — and who often find themselves unable to escape horrific living and working conditions.

Jacob Sims, a transnational crime and modern slavery expert, said Dara has played an important role in uncovering and documenting this illicit industry.

"Dara's arrest can be looked at as a death knell for open civil society reporting on this issue," said Sims, who added that the Cambodian government "continues to deny and cover up the scale and nature of the issue."

"Dara was a victim of that, and a particularly important one, given the pivotal role he also played in global reporting on the issue," Sims said.

As these large-scale, multinational criminal enterprises have been on the rise in Cambodia, a government crackdown on media coverage has intensified, according to Chhan Sokunthea, the executive director of the Cambodian Center for Independent Media.

According to Sokunthea, many media outlets have had their licenses revoked, their reporters increasingly targeted, or heavy financial penalties levied against them.

More recently, the government's Information Ministry instituted a "Charter for Professional Journalism," a set of rules and regulations journalists must follow — including not disseminating what the government deems "fake news" — which Sokunthea and other free press advocates say is cause for concern.

The arrest of a high-profile journalist like Dara, who dares to question the official narrative, is also meant to encourage self-censorship, Sokunthea added.

"When the authorities arrested [Dara] and jailed him, it affected other journalists who dare to report sensitive issues as he does," she said.

PREVIOUS PAGE: Cambodian journalist Mech Dara flips through newspaper clippings at his Phnom Penh home on November 5, 2024, following weeks in detention. Supporters say his arrest is a sign of Cambodia's declining press freedom.

STR/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Activists in Phnom Penh spell out 'FREE HRD' with lotus flowers and candles to call for the release of jailed human rights defenders. Critics say the Cambodian government has intensified its crackdown on journalists, activists, and opposition leaders in recent years.

SATOSHI TAKAHASHI/LIGHTROCKET VIA GETTY

After being detained for more than 20 days — and enduring hours of questioning — Dara confessed. The authorities recorded a video statement in which he said he had posted "fake news" that could have a bad impact on the country, and concluded with him asking officials for forgiveness.

Following a groundswell of national and international pressure, Dara was eventually released on bail. Having lost four kilos, become ill with the flu, and been deeply traumatized by his detention experience, he said during his first post-jail interview that he felt like giving up on the profession he had dedicated his life to.

"After this case, it affects my feelings; even when I see a phone, it terrifies me," he said, speaking through intermittent coughs. "I quit being a journalist," he added, blaming himself for his arrest. "I posted those [social media] posts. The arrest [happened] because the authorities exercised the law."

JOURNALISM 'IN HIS BLOOD'

That version of Dara — sick, exhausted, and sounding defeated — was nothing like the crusading, brave journalist I had come to know as a friend and cherished colleague.

I first met Dara in 2008, when we were both working at The Cambodia Daily, surrounded by like-minded people eager to report on issues other media outlets were not paying attention to. We were lucky enough to be part of a brief free press renaissance in Cambodia, when the country was opening its doors to an influx of outside investment and influence. Hundreds of foreign reporters, NGOs, investors, and others were flocking to the country to help rebuild its economy, infrastructure, and civil society, which had been left in tatters by the Khmer Rouge, the communist military group that ruled Cambodia from 1975 to 1979.

That meant new media outlets cropped up throughout the 1980s and '90s, attracting foreign reporters, who came to Cambodia to explore its culture and to help bolster its journalism, and Cambodians, like Dara and myself, eager to learn the profession.

The Cambodia Daily and the Phnom Penh Post, in particular, fostered environments that were unique hybrid spaces for foreign journalists to learn about Cambodian culture and for Cambodian journalists to learn about reporting, interview techniques, documentation, and other skills necessary to carry out their daily work.

Although far from perfect — we worked long hours for little pay — these newsrooms were exciting places that gave us the opportunity to learn from some of the best reporters and thinkers in the business, improve our English, and gain solid journalistic training that many Cambodian reporters no longer have access to today.

Dara's path through journalism would go on to closely track the rise and fall of the profession in Cambodia. It was not an easy road.

He was born into rural poverty in 1988, one of four children. After his parents divorced, Dara and a sister went to live for a time with their alcoholic father and a grandmother who struggled to make ends meet. Dara recalls walking from village to village collecting leftover produce and vegetables such as radishes and peanuts so that his grandmother could turn them into preserved food.

"Sometimes I picked up some bottles and cans at weddings and other festive places so I could sell [them] and use the money to buy food," he recalled.

Dara's grandmother died when he was about 10, leaving him to live for a few years in a local pagoda before moving to Phnom Penh, where he lived with relatives and enrolled in high school.

One of his sisters, Mech Choulay, recalled how her brother never asked their mother or family members for money but insisted on working through high school at all kinds of odd jobs, from selling newspapers to taking care of people's dogs.

"My brother is my role model," said Choulay, who, like another of his sisters, was inspired by Dara to become a journalist. She recalled spotting his byline on the front page of The Cambodia Daily. "I told myself that one day, I would be like my brother, able to write news, so my name could appear on the printed newspaper like his," she said.

Dara got his first break as a teenager when Erik Wasson, then a reporter at The Cambodia Daily, noticed him intently studying a copy of the newspaper that was placed each day in an outside display case for the public to read. "The boy … said his name was Dara and he wanted to know how to become a reporter," Wasson recalled. "We talked for a while and decided he should come by the newsroom and see if there was anything he could do to help around the office."

That eventually led to an entry-level position as a kind of news assistant, or "gofer," at The Cambodia Daily in 2004, where one of Dara's first jobs was in the archives, organizing folders of news clippings for reporters to use for research.

The then-16-year-old Dara was constantly asking for a shot at becoming a reporter, and would grill

SATOSHI TAKAHASHI/LIGHTROCKET VIA GETTY

A monk in Cambodia participates in a protest on International Workers' Day to demand a living wage for low-income workers.

others on how he might get that chance. Colleagues recall a charming, enthusiastic young man who always had a huge smile and often worked so hard that he would sleep in the office. He was also very ambitious, and after a few rejections from the reporting team for being too green, he applied multiple times until finally being accepted into a journalism program at a local college.

He went on to become one of the most prominent investigative journalists in Cambodia, garnering international awards and recognition, including the Trafficking in Persons Report Heroes award from the U.S. State Department in 2023.

"Dara brings such a vital energy to all his reporting, and it's infectious," said Erin Handley, who worked with him at the Phnom Penh Post. "He has such a passion for sharing stories about the struggles of Cambodian people whose voices are too often unheard or overlooked."

It was shining a light on his own country that inspired him to continue, Dara said, and wanting to "help innocent and weak people who suffered injustice, to get justice."

"I imagine if I had relatives who were pushed off [a] building, or tortured close to death," Dara said, recalling cases he had covered of those trying to escape being trafficked. "I listened to the stories; it makes me feel sad, and you could feel pain and anger. It makes me want to continue to do the story."

At the online news outlet Voice of Democracy (VOD), where Dara also worked, colleagues not only recalled his great investigative skills, but also his intense energy and generosity.

"It took something almost otherworldly in Dara for him to stay as undeterred as he was for so long. But he kept trying, mentoring young journalists and flooding them with ideas, tips, and sources," said Michael Dickinson, the former managing editor for VOD English. "With every batch of new trainees and interns and new hires we'd hope to find a 'new Dara,' someone with as much drive and fearlessness and integrity," he added.

One of the Cambodian colleagues Dara mentored at VOD, Keat Soriththeavy, recalled him asking her to work on a story and join the English team on the very first day of her fellowship in 2021.

"His arrest affected my feelings, as I have known him for a long time now, and he's the one who pushed me to become a journalist when I was a student in the newsroom," Soriththeavy said.

Although Dara helped inspire a new generation of Cambodian journalists, he has confided in friends and colleagues that he no longer feels he can continue in the profession.

"Journalism is in Dara's blood," said Sims, the transnational crime expert who identified Dara's work as having played an essential role in documenting illicit scams in Cambodia and globally. "That he would consider leaving the profession at 36 years old just speaks to the sense that there is no further room to operate under the hand of a regime that is existentially vested in the industry he has worked to expose."

A JOURNALISM RENAISSANCE, THEN A CRACKDOWN

Dara, who spent more than a decade working in journalism in Cambodia, has seen every outlet he has worked for either be shut down or defanged by the government. It didn't always seem to be heading that way.

The Cambodian People's Party (CPP), which has been in power since being installed in 1979 by the Vietnamese government, was initially led by Hun Sen, a former Khmer Rouge soldier who became prime minister — and whose family and associates have ruled Cambodia for nearly four decades.

In the early days of the government, a thriving independent media ecosystem was allowed to develop, and experts say Cambodia had been making progress since the 1991 Paris Peace Agreements and the resumption of democratic elections in 1993.

But that progress began to backslide, starting with a CCP-led coup in 1997, followed by a series of dramatic political developments over the years that saw the crackdown on press freedom expand beyond Khmer-language outlets to French- and English-language media.

Neil Loughlin, senior lecturer in comparative politics at the City University of London, said the current ruling party has "effectively dismantled the formal political opposition and shown that criticizing the government is dangerous, making it very risky for those who might want a different Cambodia in the future."

"Cambodia now isn't a democracy in any meaningful way," Loughlin added.

Hun Sen initiated a brutal crackdown on the press in 2017, an effort that experts say has continued under his son, Hun Manet, who succeeded his father as prime minister in 2023.

According to RSF's Aleksandra Bielakowska, Hun Sen's initial crackdown led to the forced shutdown of several radio stations and newspapers, culminating in February 2023 with Voice of Democracy (VOD) being forced to close, a move that the RSF said had "dealt a near-fatal blow to the country's independent media environment."

VOD was not the only outlet forced to shut down. Dozens of local media had their licenses revoked, reporters have been arrested — often on similar allegations as those leveled against Dara — and some journalists have fled the country or stopped using a byline.

Other news organizations — such as The Cambodia Daily, where Dara and I had worked — saw the government levy hefty bills for allegedly unpaid taxes, which the editors said were not based on financial audits but were politically motivated. In the case of the Daily, the bill was for more than $6 million, forcing the newspaper to cease operations. And the owner of the Phnom Penh Post had to sell that paper after the government levied a tax bill against it for nearly $4 million dollars.

TANG CHHIN SOTHY/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Mech Dara prays in front of a statue of Buddha at a pagoda in Phnom Penh on October 24, 2024, following his release from detention. Dara said his arrest had influenced his decision to quit journalism, adding: "My body is safe, but my mind was affected."

RETHINKING HIS CALLING

Before his recent arrest, Dara had had his fair share of trouble reporting on sensitive and dangerous issues, including environmental stories, deadly protests, and murders of prominent government critics. He had been beaten during protests, including once when he was attacked with a large rock. During another protest, he saw a man get shot and transported him to a hospital on his motorbike. Dara had even been detained previously, in 2022, while covering a cyber scam story in Sihanoukville.

Through it all, he maintained his passion for journalism. He loved news in all its forms, and was even a big fan of John Oliver's show, "Last Week Tonight." He recounted his joyous daily routine as a reporter: waking up early, hopping on his trusty Honda Dream motorcycle, and heading for breakfast at the noodle shops, where steam rose from pots of broth and motorbike taxi drivers and street vendors swapped gossip over coffee.

This recent arrest changed his mind.

He is haunted by memories of sitting in a dank jail cell in an orange jumpsuit, crammed in with 100 other inmates in conditions so overcrowded that detainees slept next to each other in side profile, or with their knees up.

He recalled being moved from cell to cell, seeing inmates beat one another, and bodies being carried out of the jail — dead or alive, he did not know. Two people died in the cell next to his, Dara said.

It made him think hard about his life, he added, especially his family — and his mother having to live in constant fear for his safety.

The pressure became so intense, Dara said, that he made his confession to authorities in hopes of getting released.

"I've seen that life there was miserable. I was lucky because [my case] got a lot of attention, but some don't have anyone to care for them," Dara said.

"My body is safe, but my mind was affected, seeing the surroundings."

While sitting at home recovering from his ordeal, Dara told me how his prison experience had worsened physical and mental health issues he had already been suffering from the last few years. His health had deteriorated, and he was having trouble sleeping. "Sometimes, it's too much," he said. "I want to take my own life."

Although Dara said he would not consider "running away from the issue" by seeking asylum, he did not think he could endure another prolonged incarceration.

"I really respect those who sacrificed years in jail for the interests of the country and the people," Dara said. "They are amazing. I could not do that."

He added that many friends and colleagues had been urging him to stay in the fight. "People don't want me to quit journalism," Dara said. "But I think it's enough." ■

THE CASE FOR FACTS

Verifiable evidence remains journalism's foundation, despite mounting attacks on the press

BY ANGIE DROBNIC HOLAN
ILLUSTRATIONS BY CHRISTOPH NIEMANN

Picture a world where evidence doesn't matter, where the loudest voices win, and where calling out falsehoods is seen as an act of bias. Welcome to 2025.

Donald Trump — the most fact-checked presidential candidate in history, because he's spoken the most falsehoods — won the White House again. The social media company Meta, which owns Facebook, ended its third-party fact-checking program, with CEO Mark Zuckerberg claiming that fact-checkers are biased. Partisan podcasters and viral video snippets command attention, while the business models for longform journalism struggle. Public trust in news in the United States is at an all-time low, with growing news avoidance and declining page views.

If history has its eyes on journalism, it feels like a death stare. I know, because I've spent my career on journalism's fact-checking front lines — first as a journalist with PolitiFact since its founding in 2007, then as its editor-in-chief through three presidential administrations. Today, as director of the International Fact-Checking Network, I work with journalists around the world to promote high standards of accuracy.

I've been hearing more disillusionment lately, with fact-checking specifically and nonpartisan journalism in general: It's not strong enough, it's not confrontational enough, it just doesn't "work."

But fact-checking does work — just differently from how its critics suppose. The same is true of any type of fact-centered independent journalism.

Here's how it does not work: Fact-checking can't prevent individual politicians from winning or losing elections. It doesn't knock on doors or get out the vote. It's not persuasive to people who vote based on their cultural values or their pocketbooks. It doesn't do the work that opposition parties and political movements are supposed to.

What fact-checking does do, and what it does well, is resist false narratives and prevent them from becoming entrenched. It holds the line on reality for history's sake. It builds evidence-based records that can withstand political pressures. That's why the politicians who seek to create their own realities are fighting so hard against fact-checking, and why they are now strong-arming tech companies and social media platforms into aiding them.

In my years of fact-checking, I've seen how this methodical gathering of evidence is journalism's strongest defense against those who would invent and falsify claims for their own ends. Journalists working under repressive governments around the world understand this instinctively: Fact-checking isn't just about correcting the record; it's about preserving reality itself.

This rigorous fidelity to facts — to gathering evidence before reaching conclusions — is the true meaning of objectivity in journalism. It's not about being neutral or passive, but about being relentlessly committed to uncovering what's true and accurate. When democracy is under threat, this disciplined approach to truth-seeking becomes more crucial than ever. It's what distinguishes journalism from content production or social media commentary. We follow the evidence wherever it leads, even when it challenges our own assumptions.

Remembering journalism's history

As I've thought about how to maintain rigorous fact-checking in today's charged environment, I keep coming back to journalists who've faced even tougher times. No one inspires me more than Ida B. Wells. In an era when false narratives justified horrific violence, Wells showed how meticulous fact-gathering could expose lies and challenge power.

A self-described crusader against lynching in the post-Civil War era, Wells approached her reporting by vigorously checking the facts of newspapers and law enforcement that were explicitly white supremacist. Her 1892 pamphlet "Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All its Phases" showed the injustice of lynching by digging deep into the particulars of case after case throughout the South.

Her reporting focused on false claims of Black men raping white women. More often than not, she found, these were cases of consensual interracial relationships that became known and that then triggered mob violence. Wells analyzed the dynamics of Southern whites trying to maintain political power after losing the Civil War, and she looked at how Black communities were torn over whether to challenge white power or accommodate themselves to it. She included factual points that didn't perfectly support her arguments as a way to show she had fully and fairly considered the views of her opponents. Her moral arguments often centered on universal standards concerning the rule of law and civil rights that she argued should apply to all citizens.

Wells also argued that journalists' first duty was to place true facts before the public. "The people must know before they can act, and there is no educator to compare with the press," she wrote. She called on Black-owned newspapers to collaborate in hiring detectives to investigate individual lynchings across the country and then to collectively publish the evidence, countering "every garbled and slanderous dispatch" with truthful journalism.

Wells stands in sharp contrast to other historical examples of journalists who didn't stay focused on accuracy — and who therefore made errors and were easily manipulated. In "A Test of the News," published in 1920, Walter Lippmann and Charles Merz analyzed the New York Times' reporting of the 1917 Russian Revolution. By examining hundreds of hard news reports from the Times' pages, they showed that the coverage repeatedly and misleadingly suggested the Bolsheviks were about to lose power and Russia would continue to fight in World War I alongside the Allied Powers. Neither of those things happened. "A Test of the News" demonstrates what happens when the press takes a side and starts putting out stories before all the facts are in. "In the large, the news about Russia is a case of seeing not what was, but what men wished to see," Lippmann and Merz concluded.

The Times' reporters had relied too heavily on government officials and anonymous sources to confirm their own ideas instead of investigating evidence to the contrary. The same thing happened during the run-up to the 2003 Iraq War, when the Times' most prominent coverage credulously repeated the claims that President George W. Bush used to justify an invasion of Iraq. Rather than staying open to evidence that Iraq didn't possess weapons of mass destruction, the Times' reporting took the government's claims at face value.

In 2024, when considering the coverage of Trump's campaign to recapture the White House, it's worth asking whether many journalists felt personally reluctant to recognize Trump's enduring appeal, leading them to underreport on what ultimately led to his decisive victory over Kamala Harris — similar to how, in 2016, little reporting suggested he could achieve an electoral college victory over Hillary Clinton.

What fact-checking does do, and what it does well, is resist alternative realities and prevent them from becoming entrenched. It holds the line on reality for history's sake.

This gets to the heart of the problem of journalists who aren't willing to set their own political views aside, no matter how well-intentioned they may be. Because of human psychology and confirmation bias, hewing to an agenda or a political ideology can cause journalists to cut corners and overlook evidence that shows the world not as it is but how they wish it to be. This leads to shallow coverage that can't stand on its own during chaotic historical moments. But when journalists maintain their rigor, when they put facts first and follow where the evidence leads, the press has real power.

That power lies in its ability to assemble convincing records of evidence that expose and resist alternative narratives. Combining a moral compass with systematic evidence-gathering is never more important than when democratic freedoms are under threat from would-be dictators and oligarchs.

When autocrats seek unlimited power, their first move is often to control information by stifling the independent press. (Their other primary target is an independent judiciary.) Trump exemplifies this through both his actions and his threats — filing frequent defamation lawsuits against news organizations, calling journalists "enemies of the people," and vowing to use his power against critics in the media.

These attacks make it tempting to see Trump as an

adversary, but that is the domain of columnists and First Amendment lawyers. Reporters need to focus on defending their independence and rigorous reporting methods – methods that are at the core of the modern fact-checking movement. When I train fact-checkers, I tell them to examine claims as if they were likely false and look for contradictory evidence, and then to examine those same claims as if they might be true and look for supporting evidence. Ideally, the method brings equal rigor to verification and debunking. I tell reporters to document their research and show their work. One of the hallmarks of modern fact-checking is extensive sourcing to establish evidence.

One of the best recent examples of fact-checking pushing back against a false narrative can be found in journalism about the 2020 election. While Trump has repeatedly said that the election was stolen from him by Joe Biden, an extensive factual record disproves that, and Trump's claim is almost always contradicted in news reports that quote him or his supporters reiterating it. This is a tremendous accomplishment of a truth-seeking press, and it shows how trails of evidence can disrupt politicians' attempts to control information. Journalism creates a space for the public to think critically.

Being genuinely open-minded and considering all evidence is critical to journalism's power, says Larry Diamond, a political scientist at Stanford University who has studied democracy around the world and advised policymakers and activists on how to preserve it.

Diamond says the press needs to have courage in the face of threats, but it also needs to report and analyze impartially.

"It's a huge mistake for the independent press to play into the hands of a populist authoritarian project by thinking that they need to wage a political battle against the administration, that they need to be the spearhead of it," Diamond told me. "They can report on what others are saying and doing. But journalism itself cannot descend into being a political project of the government, for or against it. And if journalists think they're defending freedom in that way, they're not."

Journalists also need to make the case that, while many of the claims they examine are political, their work is not political or partisan in and of itself.

"If nobody is pointing out what's true and what's false, it affects your welfare and safety. It's not about partisanship," said Gemma Mendoza. She's lead researcher for disinformation at Rappler, the Philippines-based website founded by Nobel Prize-winner Maria Ressa.

I asked Mendoza how Rappler covered the news during the presidency of Rodrigo Duterte, who was very Trump-like in his vilification of the press, his willingness to traffic in false narratives, and his undermining of democratic institutions.

"We cannot be apologizing for fact-checking our leaders. We still need to do it. But it goes side by side with everything else," she said. That includes reporting on scams, investigative journalism, and analyzing overarching false narratives. "What we have been trying to explain to our audiences is that all of this affects your welfare."

Joe Rogan at a UFC match in 2018. Critics say podcasters like Rogan are normalizing far-right political messaging.

Meeting the moment

As a fact-checker, I've watched our careful methods compete with an entirely different way of embracing and sharing information. While we meticulously gather evidence, viral videos and marathon podcasts grab attention and are hailed as the media of the future.

Many political analysts credited Trump's win to his social media performance and his appearance on the Joe Rogan podcast. An analysis by Bloomberg News of a small cohort of conservative-leaning podcasters suggested that many young men swung from Biden in 2020 to Trump in 2024. The reason? Political messaging was integrated into podcasts that once focused on sports, masculinity, and internet culture.

Rogan's hours-long conversations create an impression of substantive discussion, but it's misleading. There's none of the critical questioning and real-time fact-checking that journalism requires. Walter Lippmann would likely recognize Rogan as just the sort of public relations man he warned against 100 years ago. Writing in "The Phantom Public," Lippmann noted that people had short attention spans and a tremendous desire to be entertained: "The public will arrive in the middle of the third act and will leave before the last curtain, having stayed just long enough perhaps to decide who is the hero and who the villain of the piece."

Media theorist Neil Postman detected the same tendency in the 1980s when his book "Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business" was published. Rather than Trump and Rogan, Postman saw the dynamic at work between President Ronald Reagan and television news. Americans, Postman wrote, "no longer talk to each other, they entertain each other. They do not exchange ideas; they exchange images. They do not argue with propositions; they argue with good looks, celebrities and commercials."

If journalism is trying to beat entertainment at the attention game, we are not likely to win. Entertainment narratives are free to deal in stereotypes and caricatures of heroes and villains, whereas journalism must grapple with complexity, nuance and evidence. Journalists don't know what they'll find until they find it, and what they often find are facts that are contradictory or even mundane.

That might not make for high drama, but portraying the world accurately lies at the heart of journalism. Yes, journalism needs to be compelling and worthy of people's time, but if we make entertainment our primary goal, we'll be abandoning the evidence-gathering that defines us, and we won't be doing journalism at all.

Right now, journalism is struggling in the attention marketplace, along with a host of other challenges. We need to shore up our legal defenses as we face more lawsuits and threats of lawsuits from Trump and his supporters. We need to look for new business models and philanthropy to sustain our work. We need to collaborate more among ourselves for greater impact and reach. We need to be more forthright in making our case that journalism matters, that it holds the powerful to account, that it promotes the common good. And we need not to expect the public to shower us with praise when we make that case.

Walter Lippmann would likely recognize Joe Rogan as just the sort of public relations man he warned against 100 years ago.

It's no accident that the historian and sociologist Michael Schudson wrote an entire book titled "Why Democracies Need an Unlovable Press." We journalists can be highly unlovable — annoying, arrogant, muddled in our thinking, and going off on pointless tangents. But we can also be diligent, service-minded, helpful, and even noble. We tend to get better with practice, when we learn from our mistakes and when we try new formats to communicate even better.

"Fallibility is our middle name," Schudson wrote. "But the conscientious effort to ascertain the facts and to get the story right and to stand tall rather than bow to hucksters on our doorsteps or high officials who seek our dollars or our votes or simply our submission — those conscientious efforts make a difference."

As we enter the second Trump administration, I'm bracing for challenges but also feeling hopeful. We have the chance to look closely again at what role journalists play in a society where democracy, rule of law, and civil rights hang in the balance. My view is that journalism must resist becoming a political project either for or against government. The key is to preserve and defend our independence and professional standards while also acknowledging the moral stakes — doing our job without fear or favor and letting the evidence lead where it may. The opening events of 2025 are a test of the news and a test of our core values, not a reason to abandon them. History will be our ultimate judge, and if we do our best to pursue truth, history will judge us well. ■

In an era when false narratives justified horrific violence, Ida B. Wells showed how meticulous fact-gathering could expose lies and challenge power.

TOP: DYLAN BUELL/GETTY RIGHT: NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY DIGITAL COLLECTIONS

FACT-CHECKING IN AFRICA

COMBATING DISINFORMATION AMID POLITICAL STRIFE AND ETHNIC CONFLICT

Threats and harassment abound, but those on the front lines see progress

BY JAMES OKONG'O

KEMI BUSARI/DUBAWA

A vendor in Abuja, Nigeria, with a bottle of "Baba Aisha Herbal Medicine," a concoction falsely advertised as a cure for malaria and other illnesses. Local fact-checkers discovered a so-called doctor had been spreading dangerously false claims about the supposed remedy on social media.

It is not uncommon in Africa today for public figures to quietly retract debunked claims, or even to issue public apologies.

Take, for example, the apology issued by police in Nairobi, Kenya, after a colleague at Agence France-Presse and I uncovered their use of unrelated photos from past protests to hunt down individuals linked to violent anti-government demonstrations in 2023.

Such an official *mea culpa* would have been unthinkable in the time before journalistic fact-checking became an integral part of news operations in several African countries. But these verification efforts are increasingly in danger of being eliminated at news organizations struggling to remain viable amid funding and staffing cuts.

The recent announcement by Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg that the company would stop using third-party fact-checkers on its platforms in the United States may have a serious impact on fact-checking operations in that country. If this happens in Africa, it could literally cost lives.

For example, in Nigeria, Kemi Busari, a journalist with the fact-checking organization Dubawa, investigated a quack doctor involved in the large-scale distribution of an herbal medicine falsely advertised as a cure for malaria and other illnesses.

The investigation revealed that the so-called doctor had been selling hundreds of bottles monthly and using social media to spread misleading claims. These false assertions were discouraging people — especially parents of young children — from seeking medical attention in hospitals or using modern treatments. Alarmingly, the herbal concoction was packaged in containers that displayed falsified approval numbers from Nigeria's food and drug agency.

Busari's investigation, which later won the International Fact-Checking Network's Highest Impact award, uncovered failures in Nigeria's regulatory regime and revealed serious health risks associated with the product. Laboratory analyses conducted by a pharmacology specialist confirmed that the concoction was ineffective in treating malaria or any other human ailments. Instead, at high doses, it caused severe kidney and liver damage in animal studies. In response to the report, authorities acted quickly, arresting the fraudulent doctor and removing the dangerous product from the market.

Fact-checking's important role across Africa

Debunking myths and verifying facts have become essential functions in today's media ecosystem across Africa, where misinformation and disinformation can quickly spread via platforms such as X, TikTok, and Facebook.

The recent announcement of the scaling back of Facebook's funding in the U.S. comes at a time when there is an increasingly critical need for a methodical, evidence-driven approach to combating misinformation and disinformation around the world. Meta's financial support for this work is crucial in sustaining these efforts across Africa, where funding for such initiatives is scarce. If the company were to withdraw its backing altogether, the region could face a surge in misinformation and disinformation, posing significant challenges to the flow of accurate, fact-based narratives.

Notably, the shift in Meta's priorities in the past two years has negatively affected the work of fact-checkers and journalists. The silent phasing out of human content moderators, for example, has forced fact-checkers to both verify claims and moderate content. Additionally,

the discontinuation of CrowdTangle, a tool for tracking social media trends, has further complicated their work. Its replacement has proven ineffective for journalistic purposes.

In my years as a digital investigative journalist, I've become keenly aware of the need not only to respond to existing misleading narratives, but to anticipate and closely track their emergence in order to prevent them from influencing public perception.

This two-pronged approach blends proactive pre-bunking efforts — arming audiences with knowledge about common disinformation tactics and presenting accurate information in advance of encountering false claims — with effective debunking strategies to tackle falsehoods as they appear. It empowers fact-checkers to dismantle the complex web of misinformation, champion truth, and foster meaningful, informed dialogue.

> **"Fact-checking might not be the magic wand, but it is an important part of a whole gamut of interventions to help sanitize the digital information environment."**
> **Ghanaian journalist Rabiu Alhassan**

Does fact-checking influence people's beliefs, choices, or attitudes? Perhaps. But more importantly, it enhances accountability, counters falsehoods, promotes media literacy, and encourages informed discourse.

Conversations with front-line fact-checkers across sub-Saharan Africa have shown me how their tenacity and commitment to truth drive meaningful change, even in the face of considerable professional challenges.

Ethiopia

Ethiopian journalist Tolera Gemta emphasizes the importance of providing context when addressing inaccuracies. His method involves explaining why specific claims are false or misleading and supporting these explanations with reliable evidence.

"This includes citing primary evidence-based articles and integrating details from trusted sources to offer a deeper, factual perspective," he said.

Tolera focuses on disinformation about Ethiopia's internal conflicts, which involve clashes between government forces and various regional militia groups, often labeled as rebel factions.

"Conflict-related disinformation has reached alarming levels on Ethiopian social media. Manipulated videos, false information about the conflict, and misleading portrayals of political actors are increasingly contributing to rising ethnic tensions. In some cases, this exacerbates the dynamics of the conflict," Tolera said.

Feedback from readers indicates the value of his work. He noted that "many individuals and organizations, including researchers and journalism professors," have praised his "ability to counter harmful conflict-related disinformation and shed light on ongoing abuses" in Africa's second-most populous country.

However, online harassment is a growing threat. Tolera has faced attacks from bots and faceless accounts spreading hate, and weathered cyberattacks, the most recent of which occurred in June of last year.

Journalists and researchers in Africa, like Tolera — and myself — often encounter serious risks when exploring politically sensitive subjects. In June 2024, while investigating political disinformation related to the 2022 and 2023 elections in Kenya and Nigeria, I was subjected to serious threats.

I received repeated calls from unidentified individuals who used altered voices to issue warnings and demand that I abandon my investigation. They threatened severe consequences for both me and my family if I chose to continue. Two of my sources urged me to drop the story, cautioning me about the dangerous nature of the "powerful people" involved and emphasizing that these individuals would not hesitate to harm me or my loved ones.

Ethiopia's ongoing internal conflicts illustrate how digital spaces can become breeding grounds for manipulative narratives. Intentional efforts by factions to shape perceptions and harmful online exchanges targeting marginalized groups, political adversaries, and media critical of the government fuel the persistence of propaganda. Despite this, many social media platforms inadequately moderate content, overlooking local escalation patterns or the vulnerabilities of communities under assault amid widespread societal polarization.

Conflict parties — whether the government and its allies, or militias with regional support bases — use social media to reinforce narratives, justify their actions, and subtly alter public perceptions. I chronicled this in an article in 2021 that showed how rising political aggression in Ethiopia was also spilling onto digital platforms, often unchecked. This weaponized information has contributed to increasing hostility in Ethiopia's already intensely polarized political landscape.

Ghana

Most recently, researchers uncovered a network of bot accounts on the social media platform X that used ChatGPT to create posts supporting Ghana's former ruling party, the New Patriotic Party (NPP), and its presidential candidate, Mahamudu Bawumia. These accounts expressed support for Bawumia's conservative views and frequently employed hashtags such as #NPP, #Bawumia2024, and the party's slogan, #ItIsPossible.

Despite this coordinated online campaign, Bawumia lost the December 2024 election to John Mahama, a candidate from an opposition party. Investigations by NewsGuard — an independent journalism and technology ratings company — revealed that these bots were active for several months leading up to the election.

I had a conversation with Ghanaian journalist Rabiu Alhassan, who highlighted the growing importance of fact-checkers in addressing issues such as disinformation and digital illiteracy — the inability to use technology to find, evaluate, create, and share information — across Africa. He explained that "widespread digital illiteracy exacerbates the challenge of tackling disinformation on the continent, creating opportunities for malicious actors to exploit the situation."

Fact-checking alone cannot solve the problem, Alhassan said, but it plays a vital role within a wider range of initiatives aimed at improving the quality of online information. "Fact-checking might not be the magic wand, but it is an important part of a whole gamut of interventions to help sanitize the digital information environment," Rabiu added.

Thorough fact-checking is especially critical for important events, such as elections, and for verifying claims made by those in power. Alhassan cited a 2021 incident involving Ghanaian politician Alexander Afenyo-Markin, then deputy majority leader in parliament, who issued a public apology after inaccurately presenting a photo on social media. Afenyo-Markin had claimed the image depicted sand-mining activities in the Keta area of the Volta Region, but an investigation by the fact-checking organization Ghana Fact revealed the claim was false. Once the claim was debunked, Afenyo-Markin retracted his statement and apologized.

Mali

In 2020, as political turmoil in Mali deepened, disinformation began to circulate widely. One example was a misleading report that falsely alleged Mali's expulsion from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

Malian journalist Mardochée Boli uncovered a report that was the origin of misrepresentation of the situation. Contrary to the claim, the country had been suspended, not expelled from ECOWAS — although Mali, along with Burkina Faso and Niger, would eventually renounce its membership in January 2025. At the time, however, the media organization behind the misleading report initially responded to Boli's exposé by filing a libel lawsuit against him and the Code for Africa. The court sided with Boli and his organization team, which had provided substantial evidence showing that Mali had not been booted from ECOWAS.

After the verdict, the media organization issued a retraction by modifying the article's headline and publicly apologizing for spreading incorrect information. This victory not only highlighted the essential role that fact-checking plays in countering misinformation; it reinforced the ethical obligation that media entities bear to ensure accuracy and accountability in their reporting.

"Fact-checking is vital in safeguarding the credibility of information provided by the media and other institutions," Boli said. Addressing misinformation and disinformation and verifying claims not only restores public trust and confidence, Boli added, but also encourages responsible journalism. "This process drives more thorough research, measured reporting, and a commitment to transparency, ultimately cultivating accountability and higher standards within the media industry," he said.

The case for continuing this work

Research emphasizes the importance of fact-checking in addressing misinformation, correcting misconceptions, and enhancing public understanding. Fact-checking goes beyond merely debunking false information; it reinforces trust in credible sources. By uncovering inaccuracies, it empowers individuals to differentiate between truth and falsehood, promoting informed and responsible conversations in various settings.

Research conducted by Cameron Martel and David Rand demonstrates that "warning labels" attached to online content "effectively reduce belief and spread of misinformation" and do so "even for those most distrusting of fact-checkers."

Fact-check 'warning labels' are notices that indicate to readers the credibility or accuracy of a piece of information. They also serve to highlight content that may be misleading, false, or lacking sufficient evidence. These labels are applied on social media platforms to help users critically evaluate the reliability of the information they encounter.

Informing the public is only one way fact-checking organizations make a difference, and research confirms what the fact-checkers I spoke to see firsthand: Knowing someone is checking will often push politicians and influencers to be more careful with what they post or say.

Misinformation and disinformation is indeed a significant challenge in today's fast-paced information landscape. Nancy Gibbs, the director of the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School, noted that the issue lies in its "rapid evolution and constant mutation, making it increasingly difficult to address effectively." Gibbs added that tackling this problem requires adaptive strategies and continuous efforts to stay ahead of its ever-changing nature.

As Tom Rosenstiel of the University of Maryland noted in 2017: "Misinformation is not like plumbing, a problem you fix. It is a social condition, like crime, that you must constantly monitor and adjust to."

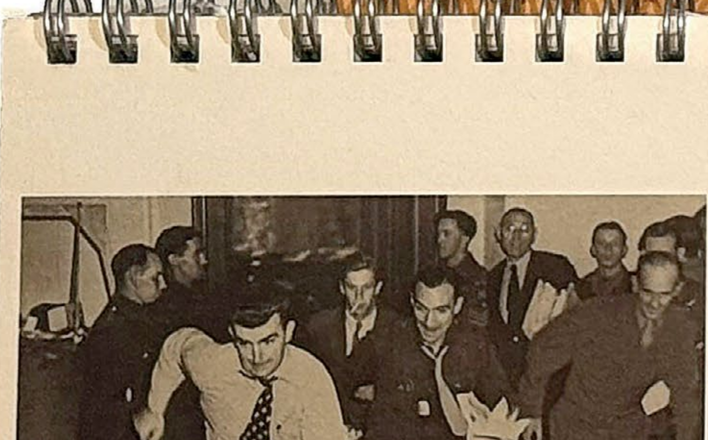
Ultimately, fact-checking organizations play a crucial role in improving public dialogue by promoting truthfulness and accuracy, according to Alhassan and others who work in this space across Africa.

"Through their efforts, they highlight the importance of honest communication, hold public figures accountable, and help create a well-informed society," Alhassan said. "By prioritizing integrity in information, these organizations significantly enhance the quality of discussions that shape societal progress." ■

TOOL OF THE TRADE

The reporter's notebook, treasured artifact of the craft, faces its own digital disruption

BY GABE BULLARD



Nic Garcia's office, like a lot of journalists', is packed with artifacts of the craft. There's a photo of Edward R. Murrow with a cigarette in one hand and a story in the other. Behind Garcia's chair is a Rocky Mountain News newspaper box. And in a frame on the wall, there's a notebook — the tall, slim kind with wire ruling at the top that used to cover newsroom desks and vanish all too fast from newspaper supply rooms. Its cover is the same shade of light blue as Air Force One, with gold letters declaring its purpose: "The Visit of President Richard M. Nixon to The People's Republic of China."

"Everyone who went to China with Nixon got this notebook," Garcia says. Pan Am airlines ordered 900 of the books from Stationers Inc. of Richmond, Virginia.

Unfussy, utilitarian, ubiquitous — the reporter's notebook carried an aura of authenticity. It's where the raw truth mixed with the unvarnished thoughts of the journalist. The New York Times, NPR, and myriad other news outlets regularly run essays and analyses under the heading "reporter's notebook." It's the title of a long-running documentary show in the Philippines. And, despite technological advances and dwindling numbers of journalists who use it, the notebooks are still produced, albeit for a market that may tap into nostalgia or aspiration more than reportage.

Stationers didn't just outfit the traveling White House press corps. In 1972, the company shipped an estimated 30,000 notebooks every month to newsrooms across the country. These books had a brownish-yellow card stock cover with the word "Reporter's" written in curly letters across the top. Below were lines for contact information, the dates of the notes within, and an address and a phone number to call to order more (Virginians were invited to call collect).

"Anybody who ordered notebooks from Stationers had a story not just about the notebooks, but about the owner, Tom Edwards," Garcia says. "You would call to order notebooks, and you would end up spending 45 minutes on the call talking to him about journalism and about politics."

Edwards wasn't a journalist himself, but the company was an essential part of the trade. The distinctively shaped pads were as much a symbol of journalism as a flashbulb camera or the "press" card stuck in a hatband. "Tom said he loved knowing the first draft of history wasn't in the newspaper; it was in one of his notebooks," Garcia says.

When Garcia called to restock his supply in 2021, he got bad news: Tom Edwards had passed away. Stationers was closing. The idea of shopping somewhere else was out of the question. "There are other versions of the reporters notebooks out there, but Stationers, they just had the best look and feel," Garcia says. So he decided to make his own. Later that year, he opened for business selling notebooks with wiring at the top, thick goldenrod covers, 60 pages inside, and a name drawn from conversations he'd had with Edwards: First Draft.

Technological advances, rising paper prices, and a dwindling number of journalists who take notes by hand are impacting the production of reporter's notebooks. Many journalists hang on to old notebooks, beyond any legally required time frame, as cherished keepsakes of their careers.

MARCUS YAM FOR NIEMAN REPORTS

Unfortunately, the notebook was becoming like fedoras and flashbulbs, a relic in the new century. Garcia closed First Draft last year, after selling about 5,000 notebooks. When interviews are done over Zoom and practically everyone in the field carries a phone that can do the job of a notebook, tape recorder, and camera, paper is less essential than ever. "Facts are facts, journalists just use fewer notebooks now," Garcia says. And there are fewer journalists to use the notebooks. First Draft's three years were years of record layoffs in newsrooms, constant financial instability, and declining trust in the media.

Slow sales aren't why Garcia closed First Draft; no good reporter is in it just for the money. Garcia closed because he couldn't keep making the notebooks. The mill that made paper for First Draft's covers closed and Garcia couldn't find the same color, quality, and price from another supplier in the U.S. "It didn't make sense to me if I couldn't make a product I loved," he says. The last First Draft order went out in December. It's the type of metaphor a reporter might jot down as they think through a story: Newspapers, and now paper itself, are in short supply.

From the spelling of "lede" to the reason for putting "-30-" to indicate the end of stories, journalism is full of traditions whose origins aren't as well-documented as we'd like them to be before committing them to print.

One story of the notebook says Landon Edwards, Tom's father and founder of Stationers Inc., developed it in the 1940s, modeling it after a military notebook he saw in Britain. Further south, Claude Sitton of The New York Times was known for cutting stenographer's pads in half to make pocket-sized notebooks while covering the civil rights movement. Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff credit Sitton with the notebooks in their book "The Race Beat," praising the pads as ideally discreet for reporting in dangerous places (Sitton reportedly never sat with his back to the door of a restaurant).

The design has other benefits — it's narrow enough to hold in one hand and thick enough that the writer doesn't need a desk. By the middle of the 1960s, a handful of companies made reporter's notebooks in various sizes, but always pocketable and top-bound.

Ask a fellow journalist about the notebook and you're likely to hear a story of how they got their first one, and how it was a rite of entry into the profession. You may also get an earful about how to properly use it. The natural inclination is to write from top to bottom, but many reporters alternate — writing top-to-bottom on the front of pages, then flipping the notebook over and writing with the wires down on the back of pages, which leads to all the writing being right-side-up when the notebook is open flat on the table next to your typewriter (or laptop). This is how Garcia uses them, and it's how I have for years, ever since I saw a reporter I admired doing it.

Garcia "couldn't begin to guess" how many Stationers notebooks he's gone through. I've hauled boxes of them between newsrooms, states, and continents. A stash of old, full notebooks is a measure of a career. It's material for an unwritten memoir. Notes might be taken as evidence in court cases. On rare occasions, they end up in museums — the New York Historical Society features some of Robert Caro's Champion-brand model 560 notebooks, which are called "shorthand books" but have the shape of the classic reporter's model.

Someone doesn't need to be a reporter to use a reporter's notebook any more than they need to be a stenographer to use a steno pad or a judge to use legal paper.

"It's just a useful size for anyone," says Bryan Bedell, a designer with Field Notes, one of a handful of notebook companies that have become cool in the digital age. Field Notes developed its own take on a reporter's notebook in partnership with the journalist John Dickerson. It began as a limited edition in 2015, but the company hasn't stopped making it. Bedell doesn't think most of the buyers are journalists, though. "Maybe there's an aspirational aspect of people who want to be journalists, or who want to look like journalists."

Unfussy, utilitarian, ubiquitous — the reporter's notebook carried an aura of authenticity. It's where the raw truth mixed with the unvarnished thoughts of the journalist.

Aspiration sells. The company Moleskine has long cited Hemingway in its marketing, suggesting the only thing between you and the Great American Novel is the right pad of paper. And Moleskine is just one of the higher-end brands that have moved into reporter's notebooks (its models start around $14). There's also a model from luxury pencil company Blackwing ($12 for two), and Baltimore-based Write Notepads ($12 each, but they have 120 pages). When most work is done on screens, a nice notebook is a luxury, or even a status symbol in meeting rooms.

"I would imagine, like most things, the market will continue towards luxury items versus bare necessity," Bedell says.

There are lower-priced reporter's notebooks on the market. One of the last legacy makers of the books is Portage, which began in the 1950s as the supply division for Knight Ridder newspapers and sells reporter's notebooks for $20 a dozen. Like the newspapers Knight Ridder bought and sold, Portage has changed hands a few times. "When we took it over eight years ago, you know, reporter's notebooks were probably half of our sales," says Jeff Briggs, Portage's co-owner.

Briggs says Portage still does a brisk trade in reporter's notebooks, though he couldn't provide specific numbers on sales. What's changed, he says, is who buys them. It used to be that most of the sales were bulk orders to newsrooms. Now, it's individuals buying packs online for themselves. Portage has expanded in the last few years, but not through reporter's notebooks. The company now sells pads for specific purposes — police reports, doctors' notes, diet tracking, and even keeping appointments for businesses. These are all increasingly electronic professions, but the notebooks sell well.

"People like paper," Briggs says. "They like something tangible."

The benefits of writing on paper are clear. Studies have found that taking notes by hand helps the writer remember. And no matter how ubiquitous electronic technology might be, it's never foolproof. "I tell all of my reporters: 'Oh my God, do not trust a recording,'" Garcia says. "At the very least, write down one good quote. Write down one good quote so you know you have that in case Apple Intelligence fails."

Portage's costs are lower than First Draft's partly because of how they're made. Even before Briggs bought the company, the notebooks were made overseas. Briggs says making them in the U.S. would mean charging four times as much, and that's if he could find a factory to do it. "We actually did try to move to a U.S.-based manufacturer," he says. "They basically just want to be contract manufacturing for large companies — for example, making the private label products for CVS or Rite Aid or something like that. They're not interested in a smaller, niche brand."

"We're really having a hard time with paper," Bedell says. "Paper manufacturers, even going back a couple decades, have been merging into fewer and fewer bigger companies and reducing their line."

Besides his specifications on size, look, and quality, Garcia wanted his notebooks to be both made in the U.S. and sold at a price that fit a journalist's salary (or that wouldn't make administrators buying supplies for newsrooms balk). "Reporters have too much to worry about than just having a crappy notebook. If you can't pay them what they deserve, at least give them a decent notebook," he says. "I was far too altruistic in this venture, but it was important."

Garcia sold 10-packs of the classic reporter's notebook for $30 (a slightly shorter model costs $28 a pack). His father, a professional business coach, told him this was too low. "I said, 'I don't plan on making a million dollars,' and he said, 'Well, now you never will,'" he says. "Okay. Thanks, Dad."

Garcia considered upping his digital marketing to sell a few more notebooks, but "you have to be up on all of the trends, and frankly, I just never had the sort of time or capital to really break into making the viral videos," he says.

The parallels just keep piling up. A need to go viral, corporate consolidation, a few large owners controlling the industry, pressure to fit into a specific form and style to ensure profits — a reporter is all too familiar with these trends, even if they don't use a notebook anymore. But Garcia isn't one to rely on an easy cliché. Rather than dwell on the past, he wants to learn from it. He mentions Sitton's notebook, how it was a technological innovation that helped his reporting. "Technology has to keep advancing, and we might have reached a point where we have much better operating software to tell stories that matter," he says. "As long as there's good journalism and we have tools to do that, that's what matters most." ■

THE LINGERING TRAUMA OF COVID COVERAGE FOR ITALIAN JOURNALISTS

Years after covering the pandemic, many struggle to process what they witnessed

BY STEFANIA D'IGNOTI

PHOTOS BY FABIO BUCCIARELLI

THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX

Whenever Alessandra Loche walks her dog, Samantha, down Via Marconi in the northern Italian city of Bergamo, flashbacks of army men loudly loading coffins onto their trucks send shivers down her spine.

"It takes me a few seconds to get back to the present, even after all this time," she said with a sleepy tone of voice and sadness in her eyes. "My body stops shaking once I calm down with breathing exercises I learned during therapy."

PREVIOUS PAGE: Red Cross volunteers visit Claudio Travelli, a COVID-19 patient, at his home in Cenate Sotto, in Bergamo, Italy, on March 15, 2020.

RIGHT: The ER department at Papa Giovanni XXIII Hospital in Bergamo, Italy, in March 2020. Emergency departments in Italy's Lombardy region exceeded capacity during the pandemic's first wave.

Today Loche is a freelance reporter covering the court beat for a variety of Italian outlets, but five years ago she was a staff reporter at L'Eco di Bergamo, the city's main daily, which in February 2020 found itself in the middle of a tragedy.

Italy, and particularly the regions of Lombardy and Veneto in the north, became ground zero of the COVID-19 pandemic in the West. On Jan. 31, 2020, the country declared a state of emergency, which gave the rest of the world a peek into what life under lockdown looked like. In just nine months, authorities confirmed 36,000 deaths in Italy from the novel coronavirus, with the actual number estimated to be almost double.

Although two years later the Italian government ended the COVID-19 state of emergency and the country gradually returned to normal life, the scars for those who witnessed this storm first-hand — particularly healthcare and media workers — are deep.

"We weren't ready to cover something like this. It seemed so far away as it was happening in China and it was just a little more than a flu. Even as journalists we underestimated it," said Loche, who at the time lived next to the church where dozens of coffins were loaded onto Italian army trucks at night, an image that became a symbol of the pandemic's human cost. "Reporters like me who would only cover city news didn't expect to be confronted with parachute crisis-reporting all of a sudden. I still have nightmares from time to time about what I've been through."

Five years have passed since the beginning of the pandemic, but Italian journalists still struggle to cope with trauma, PTSD symptoms, and memories that keep haunting them. As some of the first Western reporters on the front line of a new story no one knew how to cover, many are dismayed to see how fast the world has moved on from a tragic news event that continues to impact their mental health.

The Press Emblem Campaign — a Geneva-based nonprofit dedicated to strengthening legal and safety protections for journalists — estimates that around 2,000 media workers had died of COVID-19 by 2022, but the actual figure is "certainly higher," according to the Campaign. Italy registered at least 60 journalist deaths caused by COVID, while thousands more have sought therapy.

According to Bruce Shapiro, director of the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, it is clear that Italian journalists witnessed very high levels of suffering during the most frightening and uncertain period

of the pandemic. "While Italian journalists responded to the pandemic with extraordinary commitment and resilience, the horrors of the first pandemic wave could leave them vulnerable to high levels of PTSD as well as other consequential, sometimes disabling issues such as burnout, moral injury, and depression," Shapiro said.

Anthony Feinstein, professor of psychiatry at the University of Toronto and author of a study on COVID's mental effects on journalists, said the most common psychological difficulty experienced by journalists covering the pandemic was anxiety. "Certainly, some journalists showed symptoms of depression and PTSD as well, but anxiety appeared to be the main psychological consequence," Feinstein said.

When Loche drives her car around Bergamo and hears the sound of ambulances approaching in the distance, her heart races and cold sweat wets her forehead. Other times it's the phone ringing that triggers her. In March 2020, that sound meant either bad news was coming, or readers were desperately calling the newsroom begging her to write their stories. "All these have led to higher anxiety levels, which after two years I decided to treat through therapy," Loche said.

In his research, Feinstein found that the symptoms shown by journalists were similar to those displayed by healthcare workers. "Unconscious emotions can surface during times of stress or in response to events that trigger recollections of ill health or time in hospital," he said. Given that Italy was at the forefront of early efforts to manage this crisis, Feinstein added, "it is likely that Italian journalists and, indeed, Italian citizens retain deeply painful emotions of that difficult time."

For some reporters like Isaia Invernizzi, the emotional toll of covering his own community compounded the challenge of covering the overall tragedy. Born and raised in Bergamo, the city that became a symbol of the pandemic, Invernizzi's data reporting on COVID deaths won him several awards. But it came at a high personal cost, as he had to cover the tragedy while all around him, relatives and colleagues were succumbing to the virus.

> **"We weren't ready to cover something like this. It seemed so far away as it was happening in China, and it was just a little more than a flu. Even as journalists we underestimated it."**
>
> **Alessandra Loche, freelance journalist**

"I still remember my first silly assignment at the time," Invernizzi said, recounting how he had been sent to Bergamo's airport — the third-largest in Italy — to ask travelers what they thought about "this new virus coming from China." "Little did I know my city was about to become COVID's ground zero," he added.

The months that followed became a spiral of trauma for Invernizzi. He saw many of his colleagues end up in the intensive care unit, and one of the newsroom's photographers died. The constant mourning and dealing with death and illness on a daily basis, both at work and at home, impacted his sleeping habits.

"I felt the gravity of my mission, collecting the stories of those who were sick before they actually died. ... It was a heavy task for my mental health," he said. "Being one of the few people [as a journalist] going around despite the lockdown, spending time in hospitals like a healthcare worker, and dealing with relatives who would constantly cry on your shoulders ... is something I will never forget."

What saved him was to maintain a data-driven approach so that he could attempt to detach himself from the more emotional side of reporting. In one instance, he was able to provide clarification for a family whose father had died of COVID but hadn't been registered as a victim of the virus.

Others, however, decided that the emotional side was what was missing from coverage. Photojournalist Fabio Bucciarelli had completely different plans before the pandemic broke out. As a war reporter specializing in conflict and humanitarian crises, he was bound for South Sudan when the lockdown stopped all international flights. He never thought he'd cover a giant tragedy in his own country.

"When I report on wars, there's a clear visual element that stands out. You can give a face to an enemy or the victims," Bucciarelli said. "But when COVID began, all we could visually see was just photos of clean water in Venice, clinical objects like masks and gloves and empty squares, but no photos of the families' struggles, the true face of COVID."

So he set out on a mission to give a face to the ravages of a faceless enemy, embedding with the local Red Cross and following ambulances around Bergamo day and night. Capturing crying relatives unable to honor their loved ones, funerals, and people stuck in bed in complete solitude, his photos came to symbolize Italy's pandemic.

While on a one-year assignment with The New York Times, he became close to many of his sources and shared their moments of sorrow. "Working in your own country

A gurney sits in a courtyard of the Pesenti Fenaroli Hospital in Alzano Lombardo, Italy, on March 16, 2020. In the first nine months of the pandemic, authorities confirmed 36,000 COVID deaths in the country, with the actual number estimated to be almost double.

makes a huge difference. There's no intermediary when you speak to people, no translator, no humanitarian workers," Bucciarelli said. "So even though it's not the same emotional transport as covering wars for decades, it still moves you, because it's your community."

Bucciarelli said he did not like the way people constantly likened pandemic coverage to front-line war reporting. "It made me feel like we were devaluing the work of those who've covered conflicts for years," he said. "Thankfully we quickly dropped that term — it made me feel sick."

Much like covering war, however, the first months of COVID-19 required journalists to contend with death on a vast scale, with ongoing danger to themselves. and with an unpredictable outcome, according to the Dart Center's Shapiro. But coverage of the pandemic also presented its own unique challenges. "Unlike war — in which the risks, however horrible, are visible and known — COVID was both pervasive and mysterious, the nature of its threat wildly uncertain for many months," Shapiro said. "And then add to that the enormously stressful job of reinventing newsrooms for entirely remote work flows. All of these factors together meant an unprecedented combination of stress and trauma."

Many of the journalists covering the worst consequences of the pandemic were local reporters with no experience reporting on war, disasters, or large-scale trauma, and they worked in smaller local newsrooms without safety training or the resources to prepare for the crisis, Shapiro added. Reporters' own health and their communities and families were at constant risk and part of the story.

"I know many colleagues who've covered big-scale conflicts hated this term, but for someone who had mostly covered local healthcare news until then, it sort of felt like parachuting into a conflict area," said Valentina Calzavara, a journalist from the local Tribuna di Treviso who occasionally writes for other papers in the region.

"Unlike war ... COVID was both pervasive and mysterious, the nature of its threat wildly uncertain for many months ... These factors together meant an unprecedented combination of stress and trauma."

Bruce Shapiro, director of the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma

The husband and son of Teresina Gregis mourn at her funeral in Bergamo, Italy, on March 21, 2020. The northern region of Lombardy became ground zero of the COVID pandemic in the West.

She says that even now, she sometimes wakes up from nightmares that remind her of the face of an elderly woman she interviewed in a nursing home in Vò — a small town near Venice where the first COVID death in Italy was registered.

Five years after the pandemic hit, her trauma manifests itself in small, daily gestures — such as her constantly sanitizing her hands even when she hasn't touched anything, or writing in a journal as a therapeutic tool.

Writing has helped her lend humanity to a news event that was often reported with numbers. "Giving back a profile to families helped them give value back to their lost loved ones, but also helped me elaborate what I've been through," she said. Calzavara co-authored a book in 2020 about COVID and dedicated two chapters to what happened to journalists, a subject she felt needed a platform.

"I was surprised by how people collectively removed this period from their lives," she said. "Personally, I can't forget anything. ... Perhaps because I was among the few who was able to move around, therefore I have vivid memories of actions, while those who physically stood still at home have lived it like a dream."

Calzavara believes it could take 15 or 20 years for people to be ready to talk about these experiences with detachment, but for now, "I know that all the pain remains — you just learn how to live with it."

According to Feinstein, the Toronto psychiatry professor, for those whose lives were touched in a traumatic way — such as the loss of relatives or close friends, or witnessing people die — the memory will remain very alive. "People often suppress traumatic memories. Necessity dictates that as life goes on, one cannot dwell on what has passed, but that does not mean that the trauma of the moment has been forgotten," he said.

While reporting for her book and interviewing therapists and psychologists, Calzavara realized she needed help. She began seeing a therapist herself, and learned how to cope with her own pain. "I realized that listening to other people's desperation for hours, for months, took a toll on me. At first there was the adrenaline rush of covering something new in my field, but the more it lasted, the worse it got."

Looking back at her own coverage, she says it's understandable to want to forget but that it is not fair to do so, and that it is important to reflect on what journalists did right and what they have learned. "What I wish is that we find new ways to tell this tragedy and the period we all collectively, globally lived, that is always with us and taught us how to face a collective trauma," Calzavara said. "We can use it to prepare for the next pandemic or the next crisis." ■

Nieman Foundation Curator Ann Marie Lipinski to step down

Nieman Foundation Curator Ann Marie Lipinski will step down on July 1, 2025, completing a 14-year tenure framed by dramatic disruption and reinvention in journalism.

A Nieman Fellow herself during the 1989-1990 academic year at Harvard, Lipinski as curator guided the foundation through years of unprecedented change, including the pivot from print to digital; the proliferation of dis- and misinformation; growing reliance on artificial intelligence to report the news; the ascendance of social media; the shuttering of hundreds of local news outlets; and assaults on journalists.

Lipinski recalibrated the Nieman fellowship program to include more journalists from emerging news organizations; collaborated with

Harvard's Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society to launch the Nieman-Berkman Fellowship in Journalism Innovation; supported local reporters with a two-year fellowship for local investigative journalists; and bolstered writing on China by offering a specialized two-year fellowship in partnership with The Associated Press.

In her first year as curator, she introduced the Nieman Visiting Fellowship, offering short-term research opportunities not only to journalists, but also technologists, publishers and academics working to advance journalism. And she recommitted to Nieman's historic support of journalists, some in exile, who have labored in countries where independent reporting is treated as a crime.

Lipinski served journalists beyond the fellowship and initiated a series of intensive workshops for reporters and editors covering such complex stories as immigration, climate change, housing and nuclear issues. The conferences were planned in collaboration with Harvard faculty and researchers from across the university

Nieman additionally worked with the University of Chicago Institute of Politics to train political journalists on reporting beyond the horse race in the run-up to the 2016, 2020 and 2024 U.S. presidential elections. Lipinski also advanced Nieman's efforts to mentor a new generation, expanding the annual Christopher J. Georges Conference on College Journalism.

At the invitation of the Pulitzer Prize Board, Nieman designed an ambitious exploration of the best of American journalism, arts and letters — a three-day celebration at Harvard of the 2016 centennial of the Pulitzer Prizes. The event was Nieman's largest-ever public convening.

Harvard will soon begin a search to identify Lipinski's successor, and we will share more about her Nieman years in the next issue of Nieman Reports. ■

LISA ABITBOL

1994

Christina Lamb, chief foreign correspondent for The Sunday Times, was named Foreign Correspondent of the Year by the London-based Society of Editors.

2009

Hannah Allam has joined ProPublica as one of three new reporters in the Washington, D.C., bureau.

2016

Christa Case Bryant has been named the new editor of The Christian Science Monitor, the second woman to hold the position in the publication's 116-year history.

2017

Jason Rezaian has been named director of press freedom initiatives for The Washington Post, where he'll help advance the work of the Post's Press Freedom Partnership.

2019

Mary Ellen Klas has joined Bloomberg Opinion as a politics and policy columnist. She previously was the state Capitol bureau chief for the Miami Herald based in Tallahassee, Florida.

2020

Matthew Dolan has joined the nonprofit Baltimore Banner as an enterprise editor. Dolan worked at the Detroit Free Press since 2015, most recently as a senior investigative reporter and editor.

2023

Adefemi Akinsanya, an international correspondent and anchor for Arise News, was named legendary reporter of the year at the 2024 Nigeria Media Nite Out Awards in Lagos, Nigeria.

Sheikh Sabiha Alam, a Bangladeshi investigative journalist, has joined AFP as Dhaka bureau chief. She previously was assistant editor and senior reporter for the daily Prothom Alo newspaper.

2024

Denise Hruby has joined the Miami Herald as a climate reporter, and will report on climate change and collaborate with Florida International University's journalism school.

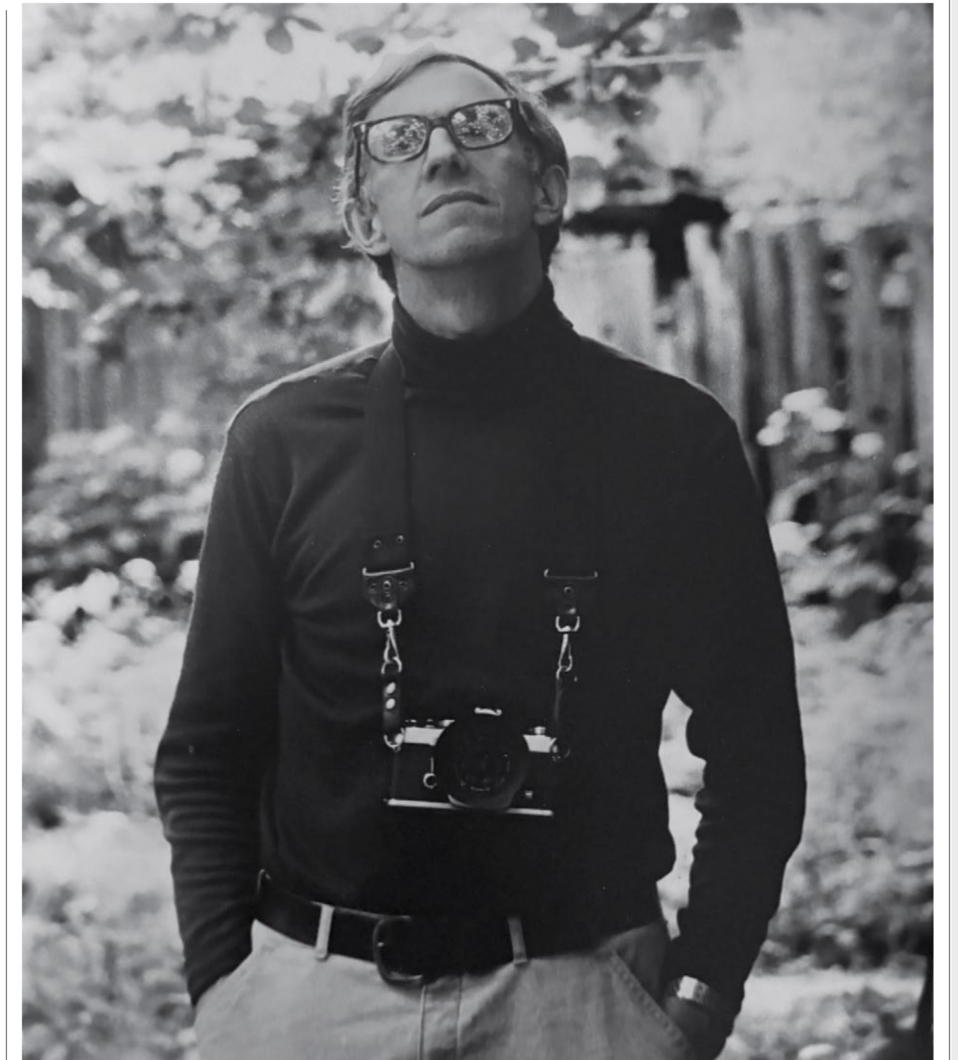
Johanna Wild, an open-source researcher at Bellingcat, designed and built a new Online Investigations Toolkit with help from Bellingcat's volunteer community during her time as a Nieman-Berkman Klein Fellow in Journalism Innovation.

2025

Sandrine Rigaud, a French investigative journalist and filmmaker who recently served as editor-in-chief of Forbidden Stories, was part of the team that won the Outstanding Investigative Documentary Emmy for "Global Spyware Scandal: Exposing Pegasus," produced by "Frontline PBS" and Forbidden Films.

Nicholas Daniloff, NF '74, correspondent, author, and educator, dies at 89

Jailed on false charges in the former Soviet Union, he was part of a high-profile prisoner exchange



COURTESY OF THE DANILOFF FAMILY

Journalist Nicholas Daniloff, a 1974 Nieman Fellow who worked as a foreign correspondent and reported from Moscow for both United Press International and U.S. News & World Report, died on Oct. 17, 2024, in Cambridge, Mass. He was 89.

Daniloff was unwittingly caught in a case of international intrigue shortly before wrapping up his assignment as Moscow bureau chief for U.S. News & World Report in 1986. In August that year, he met with an old friend named Misha Luzin and gave him several Stephen King novels as a parting gift. Luzin gave Daniloff a sealed packet he said contained Soviet newspaper clippings.

While walking home from the meeting, Daniloff was stopped and arrested by the KGB, not realizing that he had been handed photographs and maps of military installations marked "secret." The espionage charges leveled against him were widely recognized as a tactic devised to win the freedom of Gennadi Zakharov, a Soviet U.N. employee who had been arrested in New York on suspicion of spying just one week earlier. After spending two weeks in Lefortovo Prison, unsure of his fate, Daniloff was released and exchanged for Zakharov.

After returning to the U.S., Daniloff and his family visited the White House, where he credited President Ronald Reagan for helping to gain his release. Daniloff's wife, Ruth Daniloff, a British journalist, had been instrumental in keeping his story in the public eye.

The incident nearly derailed the October 1986 summit in Reykjavik, Iceland, between Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. Those talks ultimately led to a treaty on intermediate-range nuclear missiles the following year.

Daniloff was born in Paris on Dec. 30, 1934, and grew up speaking French, English, and Russian at home. His father, who had left Russia during the 1917 revolution, had moved the family to the United States, Argentina, and back to Paris before Daniloff left to study at Harvard, where he earned a bachelor's degree in political science in 1956.

Daniloff initially worked as a copy boy at The Washington Post before studying at Oxford University, receiving a master's degree in 1959. After graduation, he joined UPI in London, was bureau chief in Geneva in 1960, and then joined UPI's Moscow bureau, where he worked until 1965. He went on to become a national security reporter in Washington, D.C.

Following his Nieman year, he worked as a UPI White House correspondent and, among other stories, covered the resignation of President Richard Nixon.

In 1980, he joined U.S. News & World Report and became Moscow bureau chief.

Daniloff started teaching journalism at Northeastern University in 1989 and directed the school's journalism program from 1992 to 1999. He continued to teach courses until he retired in 2014. He also taught journalism at the Uzbek State World Languages University in Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

His books include his memoir, "Two Lives, One Russia," "Of Spies and Spokesmen: My Life as a Cold War Correspondent (Volume 1)," and "The Kremlin and the Cosmos."

An avid rower, Daniloff competed in the Head of the Charles Regatta into his 80s.

Daniloff's wife died in January 2024. He is survived by his daughter, Miranda Daniloff Mancusi; his son, Caleb Daniloff; five grandchildren; and two great-grandchildren. ■

From left: Ryan Kellett, Dave Lawler, and Priyanka Vora at the Axios Local staff retreat in Charlotte, North Carolina, in October 2023.

At Journalism's Edge

Ryan Y. Kellett, NF '25, on a career spent chasing breakthroughs

I am obsessed with being at the edge. I'm constantly chasing what's next in technology, media, and in my own career. The only problem is: No one knows where the edge is, not even me.

The first time I encountered this feeling was in high school, when I started contributing to a regular feature in the San Francisco Chronicle called "Two Cents," in which readers sounded off on a topic in the news in a "man-on-the-street" interview format.

The trick, I quickly figured out, was that the Chronicle didn't actually go out and interview people, but instead emailed out a question to a pre-vetted list of readers who would respond with a sentence or two of their opinion.

I learned to game this system of attention: I discovered that if I just said something minorly controversial, I was guaranteed publication. Using this knowledge, I appeared in the paper all the time. My parents' friends would exclaim: "You got stopped on the street AGAIN!?"

This first brush with local fame was great for inflating my ego, but not for actually teaching me to delve deeply into finding out what I truly believed. It did, however, give me a real sense that something as simple as email could be wielded as a tool to change things.

I continued exploring this relatively new online universe in college — circa 2006 — where I saw the opportunity the web could bring to college life, and started a hyper-local blog covering our campus in Middlebury, Vermont. The college newspaper published just once a week, and missed out on anything happening in real time. I knew I could outperform the paper by reaching students faster and more efficiently than anyone else on campus.

I learned two things from my entrepreneurial endeavor that would stick with me throughout my career: Testing things out — and learning from that experimentation — was at the heart of every process, and not needing anyone's permission to publish equaled total freedom.

My blog led to my first professional newsroom job: as the first-ever social media intern at National Public Radio. I mainly moderated web comments, a decidedly unglamorous task, but one I treasured for the chance to get to know the NPR community.

I now tell everyone that they should start their journalism career in content moderation, because you get an intimate sense of who your readers or listeners are, what they care about, and why. It also helps you develop a sense of responsibility for the journalism being produced.

When I started at The Washington Post in 2010, I felt as though I had joined an organization at war with itself, as it had recently merged its print and digital newsrooms. I was so naive that I literally had to ask which team I was on. This naivete extended to me having to be told the name of the man who was sitting at my assigned desk on my first day, as I did not recognize him. His name was Bob Woodward, and he was only pretending to occupy my seat as he was starring in a commercial being filmed for the new Washington Post iPad app.

I had entered that newsroom — where I would remain for more than a decade — obsessed with the coming tsunami of mobile phones and social media. Although they were nascent technologies at the time, that was how I consumed the internet — loading mobile web pages on a slow Motorola Droid X smartphone. I used Instagram in its early days when it was still a blurry photo-sharing app, and Twitter when it was still referred to as "microblogging." Thinking back, I chuckle with nostalgia, but at the time, it was exhilarating.

The growing pains of early digital adaptations made for widespread newsroom uneasiness dotted with occasional breakthroughs. For example, when I was assigned to help the Post's federal government reporting team and offered to assist a colleague who was searching for a source in an obscure federal department, I got a response along the lines of: "Knock yourself out, kid."

From left: Priyanka Vora, Lydia Massey, Jaden Amos, and Paulina Jeng gather during election night for the 2022 U.S. midterm elections in the Axios newsroom in Arlington, Virginia.

RYAN Y. KELLETT

I ran a series of callouts — a kind of online/social media request for sources — and, sure enough, found a reader who had worked in this obscure government department. I found the person's phone number from a print subscriber record, and the reporter was able to make contact, weaving the interview into a Page 1 story.

I will never forget the power of that lesson: Our readers were not merely consumers of our product but also potential sources. It was exhilarating to feel I had discovered the precise edge where the editorial and the business sides met.

I rose to become a manager during the Marty Baron era of the Post. [Former Executive Editor] Baron was clear about his newsroom priorities: one, to produce the best journalism, and two, rapid digital progress.

On the latter goal, I got to pitch Post owner Jeff Bezos on my strategy to build out an editorial experiments team that would rapidly expand the Post's presence on new social platforms and reach new audiences. Bezos, the founder of Amazon and one of the richest men in the world, read my proposal and gave it the green light.

Also during my time at the Post, I got to interview hundreds of candidates and hire nearly 90 people for jobs — from general assignment reporting to social media — over the span of this national growth era from 2013 to 2018. Many of my hires were among the youngest on staff.

I was young myself and, at 29, among the youngest department heads in the Post's history. I tried to be thoughtful about how I carried and conducted myself, not only to show respect, but to be respected by sage editors twice my age.

> "My career successes were predicated on the idea that I was always working myself out of a job, in order to pursue the next new thing."

During the pandemic, I joined Axios, a newsroom rapidly expanding its local offerings from three to 30 cities in just over a year. There, I learned the value of speed: Everything needed to have been done yesterday. But working in that atmosphere, where there was a willingness to change everything on a dime, helped rewire my brain for the media era we're living in now. The pace of change keeps accelerating, even for those, like me, who are accustomed to it.

In the past, balancing on "the edge" in my career meant never letting myself get particularly comfortable or settled. My career successes were predicated on the idea that I was always working myself out of a job, in order to pursue the next new thing.

Because if you stand still, even for a moment, you're no longer teetering on the edge. And yet, how do you know you're on an edge at all, if you never go over? ■

The Great Return

Chronicling exiled Syrians' journey back to their homeland

BY NATASCHA TAHABSEM

The Jaber Border Crossing was in controlled chaos on Dec. 9 — the morning after Bashar Assad's ouster as Syria's president — as Jordanian authorities allowed Syrians with vehicles to return home. The air pulsed with optimism, but that joy was dulled by decades of torment and separation. Each time the gates opened, Syrian families and lone travelers surged forward, laden with as much of their lives as they could carry. Bags were strapped to bodies, cars piled high with belongings. Some of those people were setting foot on Syrian soil for the first time in years.

I remember the cold cutting through me that morning, though adrenaline kept us moving. By the first hour, my assignment partner, the incredible reporter Jude Taha, and I had our jackets tied at our waists and were running from person to person, listening to their stories. The faces at the border could have been our own relatives, so familiar were their features. As a photojournalist, my role was twofold: first, to document the reality of the border, the displacement and homecoming of Syrians, and second, to do so with care, humility, and diligence. We carried bags and suitcases, lent our phones, shared meals, and sat beside them on the concrete. What mattered most to me was forming connections.

One moment in particular stayed with me. A Syria-registered car had just been cleared to cross. Officers barked orders, and people scrambled to share tearful kisses and gather their belongings. A girl sat quietly in the back seat of a white car, surrounded by women. Everyone around the car was in motion, packing, shouting over the growling engine, over the foreign reporters, taxi drivers, and officers adding to the din.

The girl chose to hold my gaze, and in that instant became the anchor of my photograph. I wondered if she knew I was taking her picture. I hoped she understood how deeply I felt for her.

Photographing her demanded everything I had: mind, body, and instinct. The mechanics of photography — light, composition, color — felt secondary to the weight of her expression. I prefer manual focus for its deliberate nature, so I adjusted the focus, framing the image around her eyes, her little face, filtering out the surrounding commotion. It was the only way to capture what she already knew: that she was crossing into a home she had never known, and that she wasn't afraid.

Later, a man approached us, his voice soft and tentative. "Do you have time to listen to me?"

We nodded. His name was Baron Khlaif. He wanted to return to Syria to search for his father, missing since the early years of the civil war. He carefully pulled out a small, worn bundle: photographs of his father and his family, their edges curled and yellowed by time; torn, empty envelopes that once held Baron's Syrian identity card and passport, now confiscated — a barrier to entry; and letters and a journal, each a fragile thread connecting him to the life he was trying to reclaim.

I asked if I could photograph his keepsakes, and he readily agreed, eager to share his story, or what he had left of it. The sanctity of the moment touched me. Those were lifetimes held in his hands. The shot felt intrusive, so I was especially careful. I wanted the colors to speak this time, so I kept much of the faces he was showing out of focus. The reds resonated with me. I felt they represented his courage, his heart, and his longing for home.

It was his second attempt to enter through the gate. Despite his threadbare clothing and lack of documents, his faith in his father's survival shone through.

"I know he's alive," Baron said. "No one knows this but [me and] God." As he spoke, I made a point of capturing his heartbreak in the next shot. I shifted from photo to video and back again, zeroing in on his face, his expressions. The angle was crucial to me; I wanted a high vantage point to convey the vulnerability of the moment, but I was careful not to hover over him entirely, out of respect.

For Jude and me, humanizing these stories was paramount. These people — exhausted, displaced, carrying their lives in plastic bags — deserved to be seen as more than statistics. Our own histories made it personal, too: Jude, as a Palestinian, and I, part Circassian and part Syrian. We knew what it meant to be away from your homeland. In their faces, in those fleeting moments, we saw reflections of ourselves.■

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