NIEMAN REPORTS

Nieman

AS SOCIAL MEDIA BECOMES A PRIMARY NEWS SOURCE, JOURNALISTS TAKE A PAGE FROM THE 'INFLUENCER' PLAYBOOK

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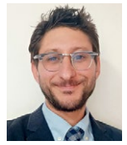

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William Mao is a rising junior at Harvard College. He reports for The Harvard Crimson, where he covers the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and lately the Trump administration's pressure campaign against Harvard. He also oversees the Crimson's newsletters.

Garry Pierre-Pierre is the founder of The Haitian Times. He was formerly a reporter at The New York Times, where he was part of a team that won a Pulitzer Prize for coverage of the 1993 bombing of The World Trade Center. He is also the co-founder and founding executive director of the Center for Community Media at the City University of New York's Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism.

Ben Reininga, a 2025 Nieman Fellow, is vice president of audio and video at Politico. Previously, he was the head of editorial at Snapchat. He oversaw Snapchat's original news show, "Good Luck America," and launched the company's first foray into local news, "Good Luck Los Angeles."

Correction

A story in the Winter 2025 issue of Nieman Reports about the media ecosystem in Maine incorrectly stated that The Maine Monitor was a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. The Monitor, which was founded in 2020, is a publication of the nonprofit Maine Center for Public Interest Reporting, a 501(c)(3) that was launched in 2009. ■

Vandana Kumar is the co-founder of India Currents, one of many immigrant-focused media outlets in the U.S. navigating an increasingly unstable environment despite their roles being more important than ever.

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Deep cuts to USAID and other foreign aid programs are having a huge impact on media outlets around the world.

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FROM THE CURATOR

Nieman's Fertile Soil

Reflecting on 14 years of planting seeds

BY ANN MARIE LIPINSKI

The Nieman Foundation was 51 when Vladimir Voina, a magazine editor from Moscow, arrived as its first Soviet fellow. Voina, who said he had come to the U.S. "to study the other side of the moon," was a gregarious figure on campus, described in a press release as "a glasnost man before glasnost became the party line."

Scholars hungry for firsthand accounts of a Soviet Union on the eve of collapse made him the most sought-after member of the 1990 Nieman class. Voina rewarded his audiences with accounts of glasnost's emerging freedoms, including tolerance for investigative journalism. He quoted a line from a popular Russian comedian that captured the country's complex political moment: "It's better to *read* now than to *live* because life is horrible but the press is beautiful."

I was a fellow in Voina's Nieman class, and allowed myself a sort of giddy hope for the future of Russian media. Like most American fellows, I hadn't known many international journalists until I came to Harvard. But now, after 14 years as Nieman's curator to nearly 400 journalists from 67 countries, I know many and have learned an enduring lesson about the precarity of hope.

My last four Russian fellows all live in exile, three of them labeled "foreign agents" by the Putin government. Elena Kostyuchenko, this year's Russian fellow, was covering the full-scale invasion of Ukraine for Novaya Gazeta when her editors were tipped that she was on a Russian military kill list and needed to flee. The editor of the independent Novaya Gazeta, Dmitry Muratov, was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize; the government shut down his newspaper and made it a crime to call a war a war.

No soil, Kostyuchenko says, is immune to the growth of fascism.

"The main thing I want you to know is that it is possible to lose your country. It is possible to lose everything," she told us. "You know what I was doing three months before the full-scale invasion? Picking out tiles for my bathroom."

I don't like to think of Vladimir and Elena as opposing bookends to my Nieman experience. Can't soil that gives life to authoritarianism be tilled for new crops? Nieman Fellows from Poland report a recent upturn in stability, following the partial defeat of the Law and Justice party's authoritarian rule. In the Philippines, journalists who endured the violent threats of President Rodrigo Duterte (now facing trial for crimes against humanity) are fighting their way back, owing largely to the courage of Rappler founder Maria Ressa — who won the 2021 Nobel Peace Prize alongside Muratov — and the news site's editor, 2018 Nieman Fellow Glenda Gloria.

But the trend lines, as seen in my own admittedly limited sample, are undeniable.

Early in my curatorship, I had a discreet list of countries I worried about for my fellows. One spring, following a brazen midday assassination of a prominent Mexican journalist, I pleaded with a fellow to postpone her return to Mexico, one of the world's most dangerous countries for journalists. But recently there is more to worry about, compelling Reporters Without Borders for the first time in its history to rank the global state of press freedom as a "difficult situation."

"What has been most remarkable about the privilege of these 14 years is to behold resilience and collaboration in a community of journalists, something the chilling data about declining press freedom cannot measure."

I look at the map and see the faces of my fellows in places like India, Turkey, Hong Kong, Nigeria, Peru, Georgia, Venezuela, Hungary, Israel and more, knowing that increasing government restraints and attacks have put these journalists at risk while choking off news and information. Even countries long hostile to the press have turned up the oppression; for the first time in memory, we have two Nieman Fellows imprisoned, in China and Vietnam, both for conventional journalistic practice.

Perhaps most alarming is the story at home, not words I imagined typing when I began my work at Nieman. The United States, the press index concludes, "is experiencing its first significant and prolonged decline in press freedom in modern history."

Journalists shot with rubber bullets by law enforcement officials while covering protests in Los Angeles. Journalists banned from the White House press pool for refusing to call the Gulf of Mexico the Gulf of America. Journalists fired in the dismantling of Voice of America, a newsroom dating to World War II. NPR and PBS targeted for defunding. Washington Post owner Jeff Bezos canceling his newspaper's endorsement of Kamala Harris on the day his aerospace company executives were meeting with then-candidate Donald Trump.

Much has been written, here and elsewhere, about Trump's war on the press. But the recent complicity of media ownership has been especially chilling. This summer's $16 million decision by CBS' parent company to settle a Trump lawsuit over its editing of a "60 Minutes" interview was a bitter pill for its journalists, but so too for those of us who grew up in homes where that Sunday evening viewing ritual was as routine as Sunday Mass.

As we witness these cynical actions, there is a line worth recalling from "How Democracies Die," by Harvard Professors Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt: We are "vulnerable to the same pathologies that have killed democracy elsewhere."

A Chinese Nieman Fellow once wrote to me about drawing inspiration from the other fellows. "After I became a Nieman, I had a strong feeling that I'm not a lonely watchdog on the earth."

What has been most remarkable about the privilege of these 14 years is to behold resilience and collaboration in a community of journalists, something the chilling data about declining press freedom cannot measure. If anything, it is an underused superpower in dark times and I wish our industry more often embraced cooperation over competition in service of survival, something I saw at Nieman every year. This last semester at Harvard has offered a brilliant lesson in what fighting for your future looks like. Such clarity of purpose awaits the whole of journalism too.

There are two memorial trees in Nieman's Lippmann House gardens. The Eastern redbud was planted in 2017 by the Nieman classmates of Anya Niedringhaus (class of 2007), the Pulitzer Prize-winning AP photographer shot dead by a police officer while covering elections in Afghanistan. It grew outside my office window, and I watched it blossom spectacularly each spring, a specimen as bright and bold as the woman it honors.

I did not want another tree. But when Brent Renaud became the first American killed in the war in Ukraine — shot at a checkpoint while filming a documentary on immigrants — his Nieman classmates procured an Arkansas Black apple in honor of Brent's home state, and we brought it to Lippmann House in 2023. The species isn't common in New England, and I worried about the sapling, slight like Brent. Would it even grow in this soil? I tied a ribbon around its tiny trunk to help me locate it that first year.

On one of my final afternoons as Nieman curator, I went to check on the tree, now bearing a crown of leaves, and found two green apples. I yelped, a sound quickly absorbed by the lush June garden.

I sought only proof of life. Instead, the tree is thriving. ■

TOP: NIEMAN FOUNDATION RIGHT: ANN MARIE LIPINSKI

ABOVE: Ann Marie Lipinski, (third row from bottom, second from left) in her 1990 Nieman class photo. BELOW: A tree at Lippmann House planted in honor of the late Brent Renaud, NF '19.

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How to Earn Audience Trust: A Conversation with Joy Mayer

Despite increasing news avoidance, the founder of Trusting News says transparency, humility, and smart word choices can help newsrooms regain skeptical audiences.

Joy Mayer, the founder and director of Trusting News, studies how audiences relate to journalism — including how their trust is earned and lost. A former professor at the Missouri School of Journalism, Mayer now helps newsrooms bridge gaps and build stronger connections with the communities they aim to serve.

The idea for Trusting News, which was founded in 2016, came about when Mayer noticed a troubling trend facing student journalists she was advising: the community members they interacted with through local reporting assignments did not accord them the same level of trust as she did, or view them as forces for good working on behalf of the public interest.

"When I talked to journalists about that, they were depressed, they were defeated, and they had no idea what to do," Mayer said. "And so I thought, 'There's got to be something we can do about that.'" Mayer embarked on learning about other industries' efforts to earn trust, and recruited other journalists to join her. The collaboration eventually became Trusting News.

Mayer spoke to the 2025 class of Nieman Fellows about best practices for gaining audience trust, including taking care with word choices and exhibiting transparency in the newsgathering process. Edited excerpts:

On the media industry's biggest barriers to earning trust

Fundamentally, what we're trying to get newsrooms to do is to think about the obstacles to trust. What is preventing people from accessing what you're doing, from understanding what you're doing, and from finding what you're doing credible?

The answers are not that complicated. Part of it is transparency — what do people not understand about what you do? And how are you explaining everything from your ethics, your funding, your corrections, how you decide what to cover, how you pick sources, and how you treat sources?

Then there's the engagement piece, which is being in continual contact with the people you aim to serve, and understanding what you're getting wrong — which most newsrooms do not prioritize in a way that I consider meaningful.

At the core of this is intellectual humility — a curiosity about who you're not serving, who feels seen and understood by your journalism, or who might feel neglected or misrepresented, and what you're willing to do to change that. I see intellectual engagement with those ideas much more than I see an institutional commitment to change based on those ideas.

Our downfall at Trusting News is that we work with a lot of individual journalists who don't have an institutional commitment to change.

If I don't have buy-in at the top, journalists are limited in what they can do. So an individual journalist can go on their own social media and say, "Here's how I did this story, and here's what I was careful to do, and here's how I operate." But unless it's part of their content management system in a way that makes that easy, unless their boss says it's OK to do it, unless they have an ethics policy they can link to, it's all very difficult.

> **"If the biggest complaint about journalism in the U.S. is [that] people assume we are not open-minded [or] even-handed … then what is our counternarrative?"**

On newsrooms' most common shortcomings

The biggest category in which I think we are failing is in explaining what makes us fair. If the biggest complaint about journalism in the U.S., at least at the moment, is [that] people assume we are not open-minded [or] even-handed, that we fuel polarization, that we have a bias, then what is our counternarrative? I'm hard-pressed to come up with examples that I think do that very effectively, and that is mystifying to me that we would not be directly addressing it.

It's easier to find examples of where journalism is explaining very specific things. I mentioned that I advise The New York Times to explain anonymous sources. Many people don't understand that when you allow a source to go unnamed, there's a whole process behind that. So [The Times] started to include a box with their stories that says, "Here's how we handle unnamed sources."

Things like that are easy to get on the record, but the bigger picture of people's perception of what we do is harder to attack.

I think the biggest problem is a lack of intellectual humility on the part of journalists … a gap between journalists' declarations that they want to serve their audience and recognition that you serve the audience you have — not the audience you wish you had — and curiosity about what it would take to close that. There are a lot of other corporate incentives, training, and research needed.

We are also not honest about our biases as journalists. About 80% of journalists live in New York, Washington, D.C., or Los Angeles. Journalism is rooted in urban, liberal perspectives, and we do not talk about that.

The number of journalists I hear from that feel like they have to be closeted in the newsroom, about their faith, about their politics, about their kind of history with law enforcement or military, like they just do not want to raise their hand and challenge assumptions in newsrooms — that is a problem, I think.

On the role language plays in shaping trust

We send a lot of signals in our journalism about where we stand and how we see the world, what we find normal or abnormal, what we see as the good side and bad side of issues [through the language we use].

ALEX SMYNTYNA

Joy Mayer, center, speaks at the 2024 Poynter Summit on AI, Ethics, and Journalism.

Some of the language that's loaded or that sends a signal of where we are is very simple — like the word "only." If you say as a national news outlet that a house "only" costs $500,000, you're sending a signal of what's normal to you.

I talked to an editor whose reporter was writing a story about a farming issue, an agriculture bill, and the reporter turned in a story that said, "the little-known farm bill." Well, who is it "little-known" to? It's not little-known to the people who are affected by it and the community where you've just been reporting. It was little-known to you until you were given the story assignment.

I'm working with an investigative reporter in Milwaukee right now who's doing a lot of work around guns and gun safety. And boy, has he changed the language he uses. What does "gun safety" mean? What does "gun violence" mean? These are terms that are not perceived equally. He set out to report on this with the premise: Can we do this story in a way that doesn't shame gun owners? This shouldn't be radical, but it is kind of radical to start a reporting project understanding that journalism often shames people who have a specific relationship to that topic.

On how online creators and influencers are reshaping public trust

I feel like people spend their trust in a lot of different ways. A woman I know told me, "I trust everything Rachel Maddow says. I'm not going to pay attention to the rest of it." People say the same thing about Sean Hannity or Tucker Carlson.

[Some people say,] "I don't want to have to look for information. I want it to find me." Wherever people are spending their time, if there's somebody who feels like a trusted friend saying, "I've got you, don't worry about it. Here are really the five things you need to know about [X]," or "Let me just give you the basics" — in some ways, I think that can be really responsible and effective and mission-driven.

I think it's possible to be a very well-informed news consumer mostly through [online] creators. It all depends on who's in your feed, right? I'm tired of the industry's response of being defensive, saying, "Oh, if it's on TikTok, it can't be credible." Of course, it depends on who you follow on TikTok. That's what they said about blogs back in the day: "That's not journalism. It's a blog."

I was teaching a class on citizen journalism back in the early 2000s, and I'd say, "A blog is a platform for publication where the newest story goes at the top. It's not a type of content," and I feel like there's a lot of that happening in the industry right now.

In terms of navigating the creator space, or partnering with creators, I feel like we have some rocky patches ahead, figuring out the ethics of that, the mission of that, the finances of that. Because creators, in a lot of cases, are not linking back to, or even mentioning the original sources, and therefore the reporters actually doing the work are not getting any credit or any audience benefit. There's a lot to figure out. ■

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The Existential Editor: News for Humans, by Humans

From love and death to climate anxiety, **Line Vaaben**, NF '25, covers the things that keep you up at night.

Line Vaaben, right, interviews a group of teens on the streets of Copenhagen, Denmark, in 2021 for a story about aspiring rap musicians.

SIGRID NYGAARD

When I tell fellow journalists about my work — especially my job title, "existential editor" — they are often puzzled. Some assume I hold a degree in philosophy. But being an existential editor is not a philosophical exercise, and I do not write or edit with thinkers like Søren Kierkegaard or Jean-Paul Sartre in mind.

When I explain the nature of my work, many colleagues sigh with envy, wishing their media outlet had such a role, or a team with the same focus. At a time when journalism is increasingly frantic and fast-paced, the word "existential" clearly resonates with a collective longing for thoughtfulness and depth.

In 2021, I became the first-ever "existential editor" at Politiken, one of the largest news outlets in Denmark. The position was created after we noticed that content which centered human stories and took a narrative approach was attracting many readers. The idea was born to form a group, led by an editor, as a way to prioritize these efforts. From my desk — physically and symbolically located in the middle of the newsroom — I generate ideas, write stories, and lead a group of four dedicated, skilled journalists and an intern.

Our focus is on exploring what it means to be merely and gloriously human. But our work goes beyond just inserting emotional stories into the daily news cycle. Our stories must be rooted in, or connected to, something relevant in the news or the cultural zeitgeist. We aim for our journalism to feel urgent and meaningful to our audience.

For example, our newsroom shorthand for the kinds of stories we cover includes categories like "life stages," where we address pivotal events from birth to menopause to end-of-life treatment, or topics like life-threatening illness, navigating family life after a divorce, early retirement, or job loss. Another subject focus is "abstract concepts and contemporary issues," where we write about things like femicide, family secrets, climate anxiety, job satisfaction, and the loneliness epidemic.

Our coverage often centers human relationships and experience. We explore themes including romantic relationships, intergenerational dynamics, issues of gender and sexuality, or the lives of people affected by war, burnout, or violence. In 2024, one of our most experienced writers dedicated much of her time to exploring the theme of love.

We believe the act of reflection provides a critical counterbalance to fast-paced news. To further that aim, we often incorporate a historical perspective into our reporting. For example, we did a series of articles on the now-adult children of former soldiers, exploring how having a parent serve in war — and return home changed — had shaped their lives.

Our articles also strive to highlight the intersection of the individual with shared human experience. We frequently use immersive journalism techniques, with a central character driving the story, but we also engage in explanatory and investigative journalism. Through the lens of "existential journalism" we invite our readers and listeners into other people's lives, exploring concepts like faith, power, betrayal, and hope.

Existential journalism follows a rigorous methodology, and we take a systematic approach to each stage of the process: idea generation, reporting, and writing.

We collaborate with our newsroom colleagues, from photographers to graphic designers and audio specialists, to help bring these stories to life. We also strive to keep revisiting our stories — checking back and updating readers after a story runs.

In my Nieman fellowship class we often discussed the urgent need to engage readers, communities, and audiences more deeply in our work. As people worldwide turn away from journalism, it has become even more critical for media outlets like mine to convince audiences that there are real human beings behind the stories we tell — not just anonymous institutions.

Our work seems to be resonating with readers, helping our audience gain a deeper understanding of others — and, in turn, themselves.

Today, Politiken is working on expanding the approach pioneered by the existential desk more deliberately across the newsroom, to make it even clearer to people that we are a paper about human existence: for humans, by humans. ■

Why Press Freedom Merits Its Own Beat

Jason Rezaian, NF '17, on advocating for freedom of the press at home and abroad

Jason Rezaian is the director of Press Freedom Initiatives at The Washington Post. He served as the paper's Tehran bureau chief from 2012 to 2016, during which time he spent 544 days in an Iranian prison — 49 of them in solitary confinement — following his 2014 arrest on false charges of espionage. In addition to writing a newsletter and articles on press freedom and individual journalists under threat, Rezaian leads the Post's Press Freedom Partnership, a coalition of nonprofit organizations dedicated to promoting independent media worldwide.

He spoke to Nieman Reports about his new role and the need to cover press freedom as a standalone beat.

These comments have been edited for length and clarity.

Jason Rezaian speaks on a panel for the Clinton Global Initiative on September 19, 2023, in New York City.

NOAM GALAI/GETTY IMAGES FOR CLINTON GLOBAL INITIATIVE

This work has [been] a core part of my activities at The Washington Post for years, writing about cases of journalists in trouble around the world. When I was arrested over a decade ago, it really wasn't easy for newsrooms to make a decision about how to advocate for a journalist in trouble, even if it was one of their own. That landscape has changed dramatically, and I'm proud to say that I've been part of that shift. Those efforts laid the foundation for a more focused operation, and last year, I was asked to lead it by building on our existing initiatives.

Since 2018, after the brutal murder [by agents of the Saudi government] of my colleague Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul, The Washington Post has stepped up its work in defense of press freedom. The Post's publisher at the time, Fred Ryan, believed it was vital for our paper to take a clear stand for values that sit at the heart of American democracy. We formalized a range of efforts: creating a newsletter, launching partnerships with leading press freedom organizations, donating ad space for their campaigns, and collaborating on events like World Press Freedom Day. [I write about] cases like Evan Gershkovich [a Wall Street Journal reporter previously jailed in Russia] or Cecilia Fala, an Italian journalist who was held for several weeks in Iran, in the same prison that my wife and I were held, to shine a spotlight on them very quickly, to try to increase the likelihood of a quicker release for those people.

In the past, if you had a member of Congress and senators and [press freedom organizations] like the Committee to Protect Journalists or Reporters Without Borders put out a strongly worded statement of condemnation for the arrest of a journalist, that was often enough to free someone. In the past, the public perception of locking up journalists was so negative that no government wanted to be labeled as a jailer of journalists. Now it's almost a goal, right?

There is an audacity to the arrest of journalists, accusations of espionage, or other trumped-up charges against people that shows that not only are some governments not worried about the reputational damage that this does; they're actually doing it because they think it's an easy way to quiet dissent.

Today, some governments see jailing journalists as a badge of honor or a tool for silencing critics. … That's why it's so important to tell the human stories behind these detentions.

And I hope readers understand that it's not all doom and gloom. My work isn't about despair. It's about taking ideas and experiences that may feel foreign and making them accessible, touchable, knowable. Because press freedom — like all freedoms — is at a potential breaking point. We don't have the luxury of waiting and seeing what happens, and it's time to no longer just be strong. We have to act.

That's one of the central purposes of the newsletter I write. The other is to underscore why press freedom matters. Ultimately, if we lose press freedoms here and in other countries, these are the kind of resources and rights that are easy to lose but hard to get back. We're trying to show people these issues are worth fighting for. ■

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I Swapped My Journalist's Kit for Monk's Robes in 'The White Lotus'

Why a Nieman alum, **Suthichai Yoon**, NF '80, took on a small but pivotal role in the hit HBO show

After more than five decades in journalism covering coups, conflicts, and constitutional crises, I thought I'd seen it all. I've interrogated generals, challenged prime ministers, exposed corruption, and seen democracy both falter and flourish.

What I didn't expect was that my next "assignment" would involve donning saffron robes and sitting in silent meditation (without having to shave my head, since I've always been a clean-cut guy) — not in a monastery to escape the world, but on the set of one of HBO's most talked-about dramas, "The White Lotus."

That serene monk sitting quietly in Season 3? Yes, that's me.

When the show's producers approached me about playing a Buddhist monk in a pivotal scene set in a quiet monastery in the Thai hills, I was immediately cautious. Not because I feared acting — though I had absolutely no experience — but because I worried about how Thai Buddhism, a profoundly spiritual and complex tradition, might be filtered through a Western entertainment lens.

The real push came from someone close to home: my son, Prabda Yoon. An accomplished writer and showrunner for some of Netflix's productions in Thailand, Prabda was the spark behind this unexpected journey.

"You've always said you wanted to ordain as a monk," he reminded me. "Now here's your chance, even if it's just for a role."

It turns out the show's local casting team had reached out to him with an unusual request: Would he convince his father to audition for the part of a senior Buddhist monk?

Prabda didn't plead or negotiate. He simply told me the date and time he would come pick me up. Trusting his judgment — and my own curiosity — I agreed. It was only at the audition that I finally read the script.

The scene involved two Western characters, Tim and Piper, entering a monastery and seeking something, anything, to soothe the chaos in their lives. They meet a monk who says very little but listens deeply. He doesn't preach. He doesn't give answers. But his stillness prompts a quiet reckoning.

When I later learned that Mike White, the series' creator, had studied Buddhism before crafting this season, my confidence grew. This wasn't spiritual window dressing; it was a meaningful attempt at cross-cultural reflection.

What struck me about "The White Lotus" was its willingness to peel back the postcard image and probe deeper themes: the clash between East and West, between money and meaning, between indulgence and introspection.

And so I decided to participate — not to "act" in the traditional sense, but to serve as a bridge. To help protect the spirit of the story and, perhaps, offer viewers a glimpse of Thailand's quieter truths.

For someone who has spent more than five decades in the heat of political storms, newsroom deadlines, and live broadcasts, stepping into the serene, silent world of a monk was both surreal and profoundly meaningful.

My journey to that unlikely role is rooted in the twists and turns of journalism, where I began as a co-founder of The Nation, Thailand's first English-language daily newspaper run by Thai journalists. The goal was to speak truth to power in a language the world could understand.

"Acting in 'The White Lotus' wasn't just about reciting lines. It was about embodying a state of being, one I had long tried to uphold as a journalist: to remain composed amid conflict, to reflect on truth without shouting, and to offer a space for reflection in a noisy world."

That mission eventually expanded — first to radio, then television, and ultimately online — as I sought to adapt and survive in the ever-evolving news media landscape.

But a key turning point in my life and career came when I was selected as a 1979-80 Nieman Fellow at Harvard University. That year, immersed in the exchange of ideas with journalists from around the globe, I experienced a deep transformation — not just as a professional, but as a person.

At Harvard, I absorbed the Western ideals of press freedom, the power of moral clarity, and the value of respectful, spirited debate. The sense of fairness, empathy, and commitment to public service that permeated the Nieman community reshaped how I viewed journalism and the role of a journalist in society.

COURTESY OF SUTHICHAI YOON

Suthichai Yoon, center, smiles with his son, Prabda Yoon, right, and castmates from HBO's "The White Lotus." From left: Sam Nivola, Jason Isaacs, and Sarah Catherine Hook.

So when I was offered a chance to play a monk in "The White Lotus," I saw more than just a screen role. I saw a moment where art and journalism intersected. The themes in my scenes — serenity, morality, empathy — pointed in the same direction as the ethical compass that guided my reporting.

I drew from my years as a journalist on camera, during which I had to maintain calm amid chaos, to channel the quiet strength expected of a monk. I also drew from the quiet lessons of Harvard Yard, where thoughtful listening often mattered more than quick judgment.

Acting in "The White Lotus" wasn't just about reciting lines. It was about embodying a state of being, one I had long tried to uphold as a journalist: to remain composed amid conflict, to reflect on truth without shouting, and to offer a space for reflection in a noisy world.

In many ways, this brief role brought together all the strands of my life: my belief in meaningful storytelling, my journey through Western and Eastern cultural currents, and my conviction that empathy and fairness are universal values, whether in a newsroom, in a monastery, or on a film set.

"The White Lotus" doesn't just entertain; it holds up a mirror. To Americans. To tourists. To all of us. It makes us ask uncomfortable questions: What are we chasing? What do we truly value? What happens when the masks come off?

In playing the monk, I became part of that mirror. Not as a moral authority, but as a quiet observer. And in doing so, I hoped to reflect something deeper about my country — not the nightlife, but the light. Not the marketplace, but the mindfulness.

Today, I've returned to my daily journalism routine. The robes are gone. My microphone and laptop are back in their usual place. But something has shifted.

I find myself pausing more before I speak. Listening more intently. Noticing the distractions I used to mistake for purpose. I'm more convinced than ever that whether we're telling stories on YouTube, Facebook, or Netflix, the mission remains the same: to seek truth, elevate voices, and invite reflection.

Even if, sometimes, that reflection comes not in a headline but in silence. ■

Immigrant Media: Serving Communities at a Critical Moment

Outlets are under increasing political and financial pressure at a time when they are needed most.

BY GARRY PIERRE-PIERRE

[redacted]t began with a hateful email. The subject line itself was a racial slur: the N-word.

The content was just as insidious, laced with the kind of dehumanizing language often lobbed at the readers we serve. Then came the onslaught: a relentless assault on our social media platforms, websites, and emails. For good measure, individual team members at our news outlet were doxxed and "swatted," with hoax emergency calls being made to trigger a police response.

For weeks, this toxic wave of hate and racism battered The Haitian Times, the Brooklyn, New York-based publication I had founded. The Times had dared to push back against the racist claims being spread by then-candidates JD Vance and Donald Trump in the final weeks before the 2024 U.S. presidential election. The lies were outrageous — xenophobic propaganda accusing Haitians in Springfield, Ohio, of eating pets.

S. Mitra Kalita is the co-founder of Epicenter NYC, an online publication that started during the COVID-19 pandemic to bring news and information to the immigrant-heavy population of Queens, New York. The site continues to provide resources and local coverage which it says "connects New Yorkers to news, information and each other."

SADE FASANYA

As the hostility mounted, the stakes became clear, and they were higher than we had imagined. Local officials, buckling under pressure that included citywide bomb threats, said they could not guarantee our safety if we proceeded with a long-planned convening of the Haitian community in Springfield. We went ahead with the event online. Staff members at The Haitian Times scrambled to monitor and delete nasty, eyebrow-raising comments as soon as they appeared. Legal, security, and advocacy teams tried to help safeguard staffers' homes.

As the maelstrom intensified, it became clear that this attack wasn't just about one story, person, or publication. It was an assault on a principle: truth. It reflected a media landscape under siege by political forces at the highest levels, like Trump and Vance, who displayed a brazen goal: to scare people into silence.

That was taking place during the campaign. Now that those candidates are in power, the first few months of President Trump's second administration have seen his promised "war on the media" play out — with particular vitriol being aimed at immigrants and the media outlets that serve them. These outlets are having to navigate an increasingly hostile and precarious environment even as their role becomes more vital than ever.

Not only are they a primary source for keeping their communities informed about fast-changing immigration decrees that affect them; many also increasingly have to work to debunk rumors and mis- and disinformation that are running rampant. In addition, outlets are feeling the added pressure of their advertising base — often immigrant-owned or small community businesses — pulling back on their support for fear of being targeted.

While mainstream media organizations typically possess the legal teams and financial backing to push back against frivolous lawsuits, fight for access to information, and absorb public funding cuts, independent immigrant publishers rarely have such resources.

In Phoenix, Arizona, the immigrant-led newsroom Conecta Arizona is navigating a new crisis: widespread fear over potential nationwide raids by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Founded in 2020 by Maritza L. Félix to counter misinformation, several staff members at the outlet are facing threats due to their immigration statuses.

With only two U.S. citizens on staff, the rest are on precarious visas or fall under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. They take extreme precautions when covering protests, including writing legal hotline phone numbers on their arms and planning escape routes. As Félix explains, "If something happens, it's not a fine and bail — it could be a one-way ticket out of the country."

Conecta Arizona provides fact-checked news and legal resources to Spanish-speaking immigrants. Despite a wide reach and a $400,000 budget, Félix stresses the urgent need for legal support tailored to immigrant journalists.

> *"Being here, even with legal status, is still considered a privilege, not a right. And that privilege can be taken away at any moment — just for doing our jobs."*
>
> ***Maritza L. Félix***
> *Conecta Arizona*

Vania André, editor-in-chief and publisher of The Haitian Times, believes in taking a proactive approach to fact-checking and combating misinformation. "We are constantly listening to our readers," André said. "If we see a rumor or confusion spreading, we respond with an explainer article to clear things up."

SADE FASANYA

"Being here, even with legal status, is still considered a privilege, not a right. And that privilege can be taken away at any moment — just for doing our jobs," she says.

On top of these challenges are the harsh business realities already threatening small, independent media outlets in the digital era. Some have lost vital advertising revenue in the transition to digital, while changes with social media and AI have made it harder for publishers to find their audience. Others have never fully recovered after pandemic-era disruptions.

As a result, many ethnic media organizations are rethinking their revenue and business strategies, recognizing that the traditional model of community-based advertising may no longer be sustainable in today's climate.

As the very notion of a free press comes under siege, immigrant-serving media outlets find themselves on the front lines of a battle for survival, yet again.

Deep roots in America

Long a symbol of resilience, the immigrant-serving press in America has stood as a testament to the power of words in the fight against marginalization. The strength of these newspapers, many with roots in the 1800s, lay in their enduring ability to serve as both news outlets and advocates for their communities as they evolved.

During the 19th century, waves of immigrants from countries such as Ireland, Germany, Italy, and China arrived in America bringing not only their labor but their languages, cultures, and identities. For these groups, their newspapers were more than just a way to communicate — they were essential tools for survival, helping newcomers navigate their new surroundings with critical information, often in their native tongues.

Throughout the 1800s, immigrant communities used newspapers and other forms of media to carve out a space for themselves, asserting their rights and resisting the forces of xenophobia, racism, and dis-

crimination. These publications often fought battles on multiple fronts: advocating for labor rights, challenging discriminatory laws, and pushing back against false narratives that painted them as inferior or dangerous. They provided critical information about immigration policies, labor laws, and social services that many immigrants did not have access to otherwise. They also offered a sense of community, a place where immigrants could share their stories, voice their concerns, and find solidarity.

Today, there are more than 700 outlets categorized as ethnic media in the United States, according to a recent study by Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism. Organizations like The Haitian Times — which I founded in 1999 — have built upon that legacy. They provide their communities with vital services, from health and legal advice to local government updates and emergency response information. Community media are often the only outlets reporting on issues directly affecting immigrant communities, from local school policies to housing rights. They also help immigrants navigate complex legal systems, providing information about citizenship applications, refugee status, and asylum procedures.

After more than six years at The New York Times, I launched The Haitian Times because I saw that the Haitian community was evolving from an exile group to an established immigrant community and had no credible information about the community and country.

I joined my parents a few years after they had migrated to New York City in the late 1960s. They were among the first wave of Haitian immigrants fleeing Papa Doc Duvalier's self-proclaimed lifelong presidency. At that time, New York's Haitian community was a close-knit group, largely composed of middle-class families from Port-au-Prince and the capital city's suburbs. My parents and their friends often reminisced about their beloved, yet troubled, homeland.

They all believed they would return one day. Yet, three decades later, they remained, and the community here swelled as the political situation back home deteriorated.

I saw an opportunity to provide this emerging generation of Haitian Americans with a news outlet that reflected their aspirations and challenges. The existing publications weren't resonating with my generation, so I wanted to follow the long tradition of immigrant press — not just reporting the news, but serving as essential hubs of information.

However, I worried about the longevity of such a project. At the time, many ethnic publications were disappearing across the country, such as the New York-based Il Progresso Italo-Americano. Once the largest Italian language daily in the U.S., its closure in the late 1980s — after more than a century in business — marked the end of an era for the Italian American immigrant press.

Vandana Kumar co-founded the print magazine India Currents in 1987 for the growing Indian American community in the U.S. In 2019, Kumar transformed it into a digital-first outlet, a move she says was necessary to ensure the publication's survival.

"There are not many funders who understand what we do. ... They don't quite see how community media fills a different need than mainstream journalism."

Vandana Kumar
India Currents

I didn't want The Haitian Times to have a short lifespan. I wanted to build an institution. To gain perspective, I sought the advice of publishers from the Irish Echo and The Forward, formerly The Jewish Daily Forward. Both reassured me that no matter the generation, their readers remained deeply connected to their culture. In fact, many of the Irish Echo's readers at the time were several generations removed from Ireland, but still felt an enduring link to their heritage and country of origin.

A vital role in serving the community

GABRIELLE LURIE

As I learned, immigrant-serving media outlets are lifelines — at times, literally. During the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, many outlets were at the forefront of providing life-saving information, especially as misinformation about the virus and vaccines spread rapidly.

When COVID-19 brought the world to a standstill, The Haitian Times mobilized. I convened an ad hoc committee of community leaders to guide Haitian New Yorkers through the unprecedented uncertainty. We launched a WhatsApp group and dedicated phone lines, delivering crucial information and connecting residents with vital financial and health resources.

Our efforts extended further. We organized a virtual music festival, attracting over half a million viewers and

raising nearly $50,000 to support our local community and a health clinic in Haiti.

Longtime journalist S. Mitra Kalita also found herself responding to a huge demand for pandemic-related information from neighbors in her immigrant-heavy neighborhood in Queens, New York. It led to her co-founding Epicenter NYC — today a successful model of community-engaged journalism — which seamlessly blends reporting with direct action on behalf of her readers.

Epicenter has connected over 10,000 New Yorkers to crucial resources through more than 600 hours of in-person engagement, fostering trust across 60-plus partnerships with schools, libraries, civic groups, and faith organizations.

Lately the focus has been helping immigrant readers by participating in "Know Your Rights" campaigns and debunking false information that readers bring to their attention.

"The question of 'is this journalism?' became secondary to the humanity with which we approach our work," says Kalita,who also co-founded URL Media, a group of minority-owned local media outlets, with Sara Lomax. "It's not just about reporting the story but getting what's being reported into the communities that need to access information."

Battling misinformation

Online misinformation presents another urgent challenge for immigrant-serving media. With platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and TikTok serving as primary news sources, the spread of false information is rampant, often with disastrous consequences. Misinformation can often mean the difference between life and death — especially around issues like immigration policy or health advice.

The Chinese-language newspaper Sing Tao Daily in New York has faced profound challenges posed by misinformation in the community. Rong Xiaoqing, a veteran reporter for the paper, says language barriers and unfamiliarity with U.S. institutions make it harder for many Chinese immigrants to verify information, creating a fertile environment for false narratives to take root. "Immigrants' understanding of the system, culture, and social norms of the U.S. is often incomplete or inaccurate. ... Many people believe almost everything they find online," she says.

But the problem goes deeper. Rong points out that the rise of social media influencers — many of whom have no journalistic training — has compounded the issue. "They're very good at using social media platforms to package themselves, to push out information that sounds believable, but is not based on facts."

The Haitian Times took a proactive approach, including real-time fact-checking, explainer articles, and direct engagement with their audiences. "We are constantly listening to our readers and the conversations happening in the comments," says Vania André, editor-in-chief and publisher of The Haitian Times. "If we see a rumor or confusion spreading, we respond with an explainer article to clear things up."

Since Trump's return to the White House, immigrant news outlets in the U.S. have been navigating an increasingly hostile and precarious environment, even as their role becomes more vital than ever.

But it remains a constant battle, says Daniela Gerson, an associate professor of journalism at California State University, Northridge. "Fear moves very quickly," says Gerson. "And rumors move very quickly. And the truth is a snail."

The financial squeeze

For years, community outlets relied on advertising from local businesses and reader support. But the digital era has left many small publications financially unable to fully transition to digital-first models to reach a broader audience and generate new revenue streams.

"They are either far behind the curve or just beginning," says Jehangir Khattak, a longtime observer and advocate for ethnic media who is communications director at the Center for Community Media at the City University of New York's Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism. "Some of them have gone beyond the curve, like The Haitian Times, but others are still struggling to gain a foothold in the digital world."

Khattak draws a direct correlation between immigration crackdowns and the erosion of local business ecosystems that once sustained immigrant-serving outlets. As federal enforcement ramped up, and anti-immigrant rhetoric surged, fear took hold — causing many businesses to scale back or shut down altogether.

"When immigration policies started affecting businesses, a lot of businesses started to close ... They stopped advertising. So that's a huge, huge impact," Khattak said. "The local advertisements, those are also really going down ... some of them have gone on the other side of the curve ... others are still struggling."

To survive, some outlets have turned to alternative funding models, including events, membership programs, and philanthropic partnerships. However, these revenue streams come with their own challenges. Grants are difficult to secure. Often, they come with strings attached, requiring outlets to narrow their focus or change editorial direction to fit funders' priorities.

André of The Haitian Times says a major challenge for media outlets is the public's misunderstanding of journalism's role and inherent value. People often consume our work through aggregators or platforms, unaware of its origin or the investment required to produce it. Simultaneously, tech giants monopolize audience attention and advertising revenue, forcing independent publishers to contend for both recognition and financial viability.

"We are constantly compelled to justify our worth while competing with platforms that profit from our content without contributing to its creation or long-term sustainability," says Andre. "So we're in an environment that's constantly in flux — one that's being upended by innovation that could help journalism, but also makes it harder to survive."

The digital transformation continues

Vandana Kumar co-founded India Currents in 1987 to create a space for the Indian American community, a voice that had long been overlooked. At the time, Indians in the U.S. had few platforms that spoke to their unique experiences, challenges, and aspirations. Vandana saw this gap and knew that a publication could not only serve as a connection for the community but also celebrate their contributions to the fabric of America.

For over three decades, India Currents existed as a print outlet, building a loyal readership that found solace in its pages. But as the world became increasingly digital, Kumar recognized the need to adapt. She pivoted to digital to meet the demands of a younger, tech-savvy audience, who turned to their phones rather than their mailboxes for information. The transition was not without difficulty, but for Vandana, the mission remained unchanged: to provide a voice, to preserve culture, and to connect the community. Digital wasn't just a shift in format — it was a necessity to continue serving a generation that was evolving in an ever-changing world.

"I had to rebuild the entire organization after 2019," Kumar said. "We became digital, I could not afford to keep anybody on, so basically let everyone go. ... It's taken us a really long time to make the case to philanthropic organizations."

In making that case, Kumar faced the uphill battle of proving the value of a publication that at one point had been reduced to a one-woman operation. Although she has slowly rebuilt her team — with four full-time staff and four part-time contributors now supporting the digital effort — the transition made it harder to demonstrate institutional capacity to potential funders. As she notes, the shift to digital was necessary for survival but came at the cost of visibility and perceived stability.

"There are not many funders who understand what we do," she says. "And even though we have a 35-year track record, they don't quite see how community media fills a different need than mainstream journalism."

Evolving for long-term sustainability

Advertising is a struggle, and philanthropic funding and grants are hard to come by. So where will immigrant media find its growth in the years to come?

One way is asking the readers themselves. Sarah Gustavus Lim, membership director for the Local Independent Online News (LION) association, which helps independent news publishers build business models like membership programs, says that because many immigrant-focused publications have been "very connected to the community" from the start, LION members like Conecta Arizona and The Haitian Times for example, have been successful in generating financial support from their core audience. The challenge is that memberships don't immediately replace bigger funding sources, and asking people for money can be hard.

"The core question remains: What is the role of immigrant-serving media today? And how do you sustain it in a world that is rapidly shifting away from traditional journalism?"

Daniela Gerson
Associate professor of journalism at California State University, Northridge

Across the country, efforts are underway to encourage government support for local media. The Center for Community Media played a key role in passing a New York City law mandating a portion of the budget be allocated to local media. This legislation has been a lifeline for many publications in the city and surrounding areas. Similar efforts are underway in states like Illinois, California, and Washington. Many see government support as a crucial revenue slice that can help sustain local journalism.

In early 2024, Zachary Richner, a third-generation publisher whose grandparents founded the Herald Community Newspapers in Long Island, New York, organized a coalition of more than 200 newspapers to advocate for a state tax credit aimed at bolstering local journalism. Their concerted lobbying efforts culminated in the state of New York approving a budget that allocated $30 million annually over three years for these tax credits. This legislation provides refundable tax credits of up to 50 percent on the first $50,000 of a journalist's salary, promoting the hiring and retention of journalistic talent across the state.

"The hope is that this tax credit will provide some relief, particularly for smaller, underfunded outlets that play a critical role in serving immigrant communities," Richner said.

But even with this success, the fight for long-term sustainability continues. As Gerson puts it, "The core question remains: What is the role of immigrant-serving media today? And how do you sustain it in a world that is rapidly shifting away from traditional journalism?"

Standing with our community

I still recall The Haitian Times' humble beginnings: a cramped Brooklyn office, fueled by passion, a few donated computers, and a temperamental fax machine. Initially, I aimed simply to tell untold stories of Haitians like myself, not to become a community leader. However, I soon realized that in immigrant media, reporting on your community isn't enough — you must stand with it.

That truth became undeniable during the Springfield story. What started as local reporting quickly unveiled the profound risks we take, the backlash we endure, and the immense responsibility we carry as immigrant publishers. We were tested, but we held firm — not out of ease, but out of necessity.

This has always been our unspoken role: quiet, urgent, and without fanfare. Journalism, fundamentally, is public service. For those of us serving marginalized communities, sometimes the greatest act of service is simply refusing to look away. ■

PUSHING BOUNDARIES

I.F. Stone Medal honoree Mark Trahant lauded for innovation and expanding opportunities for Indigenous journalists

BY FELICIA FONSECA

JAYNIE PARRISH

Mark Trahant's commitment to serving the Indigenous community during his 50 years as an editor, publisher, journalism teacher, and columnist, was honored with the 2025 I.F. Stone Medal.

It was 1977 and Mark Trahant had an idea.

He had already convinced the Sho-Ban News on his home reservation of Fort Hall in southeastern Idaho to spend $100 on an old Telex, a machine that could send short messages over telephone lines. The plan was to get other tribal newspapers to purchase them and create a network of Indigenous news with broader impact.

Trahant drove more than 1,000 miles round trip to and from south central Washington to pick it up. But the plan fell apart when his idea didn't get any takers.

"That was one technological innovation that really flopped, but I learned a lot," said Trahant. "You have to keep trying new things."

Trahant, a member of the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes, has spent more than five decades in journalism pursuing innovation. In recognition of his expansive career, Trahant in April was awarded the I.F. Stone Medal for Journalistic Independence, administered by the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard.

Sporting his signature cufflinks, fountain pen, and suspenders, Trahant has stayed true to his roots as he has sought to push boundaries and boost the number of Indigenous journalists and the reach of their work.

"The importance of Indigenous journalism grows as this country gets larger," Trahant said when notified of his selection for the I.F. Stone Award. "It's impossible to understand this country's history — and its future — without including the people who have a 10,000-year history. So many of the problems we face today seem new, until you know how it fits into a longer arc."

D. Parvaz, a 2009 Nieman Fellow, described Trahant as someone who prioritizes his family and his heritage, is a master of difficult conversations, and is always thinking ahead to his next project.

"Mark, to me, is like water," said Parvaz, whom Trahant hired onto the editorial board of the Seattle Post-Intelligencer. "You can try to block him, you'll slow him down a bit, but he'll create a damn canyon if he has to."

Trahant faced one of those roadblocks early in his career as editor and publisher of the Navajo Times (later the Navajo Times Today). He had decided at the last minute to endorse Peterson Zah in the 1986 Navajo election for tribal chairman but didn't tell the staff, he said. Zah supported a free press. But his opponent, Peter MacDonald, Sr., won, and then shortly after shut down the paper and fired its entire staff, citing mismanagement and poor finances.

Undeterred, Trahant moved on to a new venture with the Arizona Republic. He found himself back in the tribal capital of Window Rock in July 1989 as a riot broke out in protest of tribal lawmakers' decision to remove MacDonald from office after he was accused of taking bribes and kickbacks, Trahant recalled. He and a photographer arrived by taxi and were surrounded by people carrying baseball bats and makeshift clubs. Two of MacDonald's supporters were killed by police in the riot.

Amid the chaos, Trahant had a flash of clarity.

"This was that moment where you know how important journalism is," he said. "I reached into my back pocket, and I pulled out my notebook, and everybody wanted to talk to me."

The Republic was Trahant's first mainstream media job, a role he made his own by persuading editors to create a Western beat to cover water, resources, and Native American tribes.

In 1988, Trahant was part of a team that uncovered widespread fraud, corruption, and mismanagement within federal agencies that serve Natives, including the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs. The series prompted a U.S. Senate committee investigation and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for national reporting.

Nearly three decades later, in 2017, Trahant was at a Native American Journalists Association conference when Indian Country Today announced it would shut down. Trahant put out an open call to journalists to discuss the future of the publication, which not only sustained the livelihoods of Native journalists but had broad reach across Indian Country.

Trahant soon got a call from the National Congress of American Indians which had acquired the paper by donation, asking him to oversee its revival as editor. Under Trahant's leadership, the staff increased tenfold and the outlet was rebranded as ICT.

Ever the innovator, Trahant partnered ICT with First Nations Experience, a nonprofit television network dedicated to Indigenous content, to produce the first-ever live broadcast of a U.S. election focused on Indigenous candidates. Trahant had meticulously mapped them in a spreadsheet that he made publicly available ahead of the 2018 election.

The team oversaw an hours-long broadcast that would mark a historical first for Indian Country, as three women were vying to become the first Native American woman elected to Congress.

"I remember right after, I was speaking in Minnesota in a little town and a young woman came up to me who gets FNX, and she said, 'You know, this is the first time in my life that the news was for me.'"

In 2021, ICT moved under a new nonprofit that Trahant established as IndiJ Public Media — the type of organization he imagined while at Sho-Ban News and the Navajo Times Today.

He now chairs the nonprofit's board as he works on book projects, one on Indigenous views of democracy, and the other on Native American female leaders in the 20th and 21st centuries that's geared toward young readers.

Holly Macarro, a citizen of the Red Lake Band of Ojibwe, who also serves on the IndiJ Public Media board, said she's long admired his vision.

He's the journalist Indian Country relies on to explain issues like the Indigenous protests over the Dakota Access Pipeline, the history of tribal self-determination, and complicated cuts to Indian Health services, Macarro said. He's able to do so because of his deep institutional knowledge, love of spreadsheets, and accesible writing style, she added.

But his most lasting mark is the way he has uplifted generations of Native journalists because "he's always trying to center someone else or give someone else an opportunity," Macarro said. "It's hardly ever about Mark Trahant." ■

TIKTOK BOOM!

As social media becomes a primary source for news, journalists look to the 'influencer' playbook

BY RYAN Y. KELLETT AND BEN REININGA

ILLUSTRATION BY ADAM MAIDA

Claire Ricks likes to keep up with current events. She follows mainstream news websites and considers herself an avid newspaper reader. The 29-year-old had mostly regarded social media as a place for memes and cute animal videos until this spring, when she helped study a platform an increasing number of people are turning to for news: TikTok.

Ricks, a student at the Harvard Extension School, was assisting with a research project developed by Ben Reininga, one of this piece's co-authors. Both of us (Ben and Ryan Y. Kellett) have just finished a year at Harvard as joint fellows of the Nieman Foundation for Journalism and the Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society. We each spent our time studying the online creator space — specifically those labeled creator journalists or news influencers — to explore what lessons their work might hold for the wider media industry.

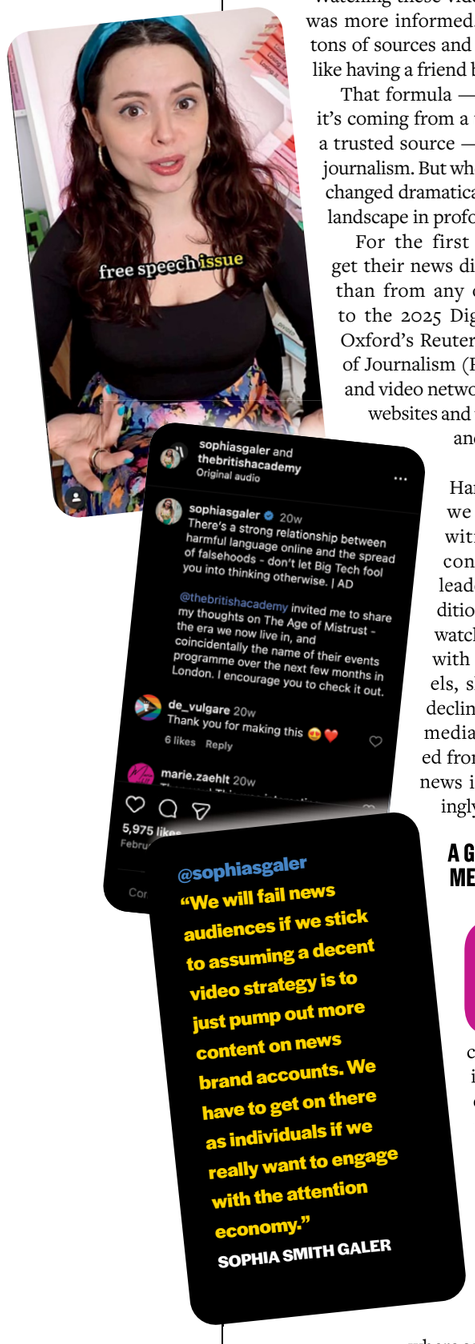
Watching hundreds of videos on TikTok as part of the project, Ricks found informative vignettes of student protesters being detained for opposing the war in Gaza. She viewed helpful explainers on the complexities of global tariffs. She saw numerous takes on the day's news, delivered by people speaking directly into their phone cameras while sitting in their cars. Overall, the experience left her "quite surprised" by how engaging the content was.

"When you're reading a traditional news article, you realize you're often actually just skimming," Ricks said. "Watching these videos … I actually felt like I was more informed. The good ones provide tons of sources and citations, but it still feels like having a friend break it down for you."

That formula — making news seem as if it's coming from a trusted friend, or at least a trusted source — is not a new concept in journalism. But where people go to find it has changed dramatically, shaking up the media landscape in profound ways.

For the first time, more Americans get their news directly from social media than from any other source, according to the 2025 Digital News Report from Oxford's Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (RISJ), which shows social and video networks overtaking both news websites and television news in the U.S. and many parts of the world.

Before coming to Harvard for our fellowships, we had each spent years witnessing shifts in news consumption patterns. In leadership roles at both traditional and digital outlets, we watched legacy media struggle with faltering business models, shrinking audiences, and declining trust while the social media creator space expanded from a niche segment of the news industry into an increasingly powerful force.



A GROWING 'ALTERNATIVE MEDIA ENVIRONMENT'

Critics point out the very real dangers of the media influencer sphere: how algorithms can reward sensationalism, how having fewer editorial gatekeepers can make it easier for false or low-quality information to propagate. But there are compelling reasons for journalists and news organizations to try to establish a foothold on these platforms. Chief among them: they are where growing numbers of people get their information.

"It has never been more urgent for journalists to amplify fact-based information," said Sophia Smith Galer, a U.K.-based journalist and video creator who worked at the BBC and did a stint at Vice World News before becoming a solo creator.

"We will fail news audiences if we stick to assuming a decent video strategy is to just pump out more content on news brand accounts," Smith Galer added. "We have to get on there as individuals if we really want to engage with the attention economy."

Unlike those who view social media as a death blow to traditional journalism, we see causes for optimism. Ryan regards a rising generation of creator journalists as bringing a "founder's mindset" and entrepreneurial energy to a beleaguered industry. Ben's research has found that many news influencers produce high-quality work, use innovative storytelling techniques, and reach younger audiences who — contrary to what's sometimes said — are interested in news.

Neither of us would advocate for these mediums to replace traditional forms of journalism. But we urge news organizations to lean into — rather than be slow to adapt or continue to resist — creating news content on these platforms as an integral part of a broader long-term sustainability strategy.

Whether or not traditional news outlets choose to engage, the changing way people consume information and the continuing migration toward short-form visual mediums is having an impact. The RISJ report found that "an accelerating shift towards consumption via social media and video platforms is further diminishing the influence of 'institutional journalism' and supercharging a fragmented alternative media environment containing an array of podcasters, YouTubers, and TikTokers."

A DIVERSE ECOSYSTEM OF NEWS CONTENT CREATORS

The "fragmented alternative media environment" the RISJ report describes encompasses different kinds of news content creators and influencers. It includes those who currently or previously worked for news organizations, and those with no journalism background. Some news creators have left legacy newsroom jobs; others are early-career digital natives who have shunned entry-level newsroom jobs in favor of going it alone in order to retain editorial, creative, and financial control of their work.

An analysis by the Pew Research Center of news influencers in the U.S. — defined as individuals with at least 100,000 followers "who regularly post about current events and civic issues on social media" — also includes people like conservative podcaster Joe Rogan. He represents an influential category of non-journalists who nevertheless serve as many people's main source of news, although filtered through commentary and opinion. Rogan and others enjoy the kind of access to people in power — including Donald Trump, a heavy user of social media who has elevated the influence and access of content creators — once reserved for the traditional news media. The Pew study found that many U.S. news influencers have a profile similar to Rogan's: a majority are men who lean Republican or conservative.

TIKTOK

THE INFLUENCER FORMULA

Our own studies this year focused less on the politics and pitfalls of the news influencer phenomenon and more on the mechanics of how news content creators practice their craft and what lessons the media industry might learn from them. Specifically, we've delved into how viewers engage with news creator content, and how such content is succeeding where traditional media continues to flounder: in building trust, expanding audiences, and engaging repeat consumers.

In both of our research projects, we found that successful news-focused videos on social media boast many of the same features that make other types of influencer videos gain viewers or go viral. Using new tools offered by the platforms, news content creators have developed innovative ways to get audiences interested in all types of stories, including hard-hitting news.

To explore what makes news content on social media "overperform," Ben picked a breaking news event and isolated the specific elements that made certain versions of the story resonate more with viewers. He chose the March arrest by immigration authorities of Columbia University graduate student Mahmoud Khalil, a legal U.S. resident who was detained in New York City as part of a Trump-ordered crackdown on students participating in campus protests against the war in Gaza.

Ben and Claire Ricks combed through hundreds of reports on TikTok about Khalil's case, sorting them into various categories and tagging them according to characteristics such as video style, direct address to camera, background or filming space, tone of voice, and word choice. Using formulas to analyze how well the videos performed, Ben found that many of the most successful ones offered direct antidotes to the criticisms people have of traditional news media.

He broke down those findings into sets of contrasting adjectives describing how followers of news influencers feel about legacy media versus how they feel about news content on social platforms:

Elite	intimate
Biased	transparent
Too complex	simple and open
Depressing	playful
Irrelevant	diverse and "like you"

INSTAGRAM

While Ben studied how creators reach audiences and what kind of content most resonates, Ryan focused on equipping journalists with tools and skills to enter the creator space. He spent the year developing a curriculum aimed at those transitioning "from traditional newsrooms to creator-dom" and now co-runs "Going Solo" workshops to help journalists amplify their work on social media.

Among the lessons: successful social media content creators feel like a close friend. Their tone and style give a sense that you can ask them anything. You may catch glimpses of their personal lives and feel you can relate — the details they share are often relevant to the story, and also help create what feels like a personal connection with the viewer.

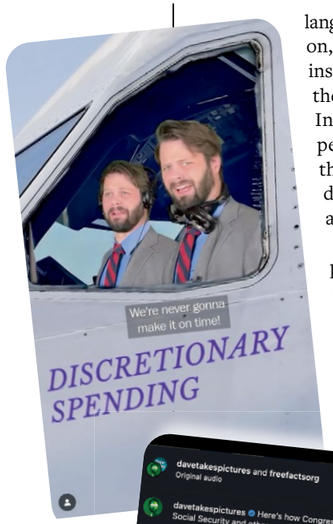
"People trust me because they see me as one of them, and I am," said Carlos Eduardo Espina, one of the most-viewed news creators on TikTok. "I'm using language that people understand. It's colloquial. I present as very down-to-earth and informal; I don't show up in a suit. People think: 'This guy is part of the community and talking about issues he cares about.' I'm just being who I am."

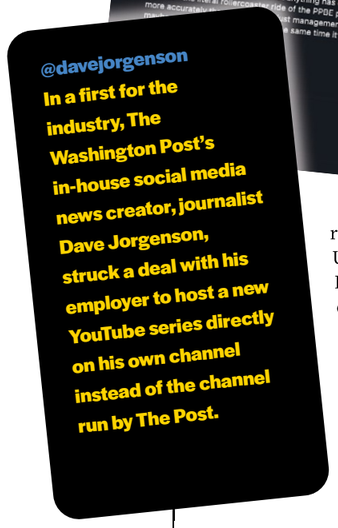
Espina, who has no formal journalistic training, reaches more than 15 million followers across platforms with Spanish-language dispatches focused on immigration, as well as with community updates and tidbits from his personal life. The 26-year-old, who is originally from Uruguay, said he started making videos about his U.S. citizenship process from his home in Texas during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While Espina does not call himself a journalist — though he has broken news — he produces content using what he describes as a hybrid reporting process that involves marshaling information from both mainstream media and a growing list of sources he's cultivated.

"What I hope is that people see me as a reliable source of news," he said. "I don't see my role as in competition with traditional media. There's this narrative of creators versus traditional outlets, but we're all part of the same ecosystem."

Another hallmark of successful news content creators is that they follow the cadence, editing style, and





language of the platform they're posting on, often making reference to an app's inside jokes or viral memes. They'll use the greenscreen feature on TikTok or Instagram Reels, for example, to superimpose a messy cutout image of themselves over a video clip they're discussing — output that is intentionally less polished than television news.

A popular tactic, for example, is to post videos from bedrooms or cars (easy, quiet places to capture clean audio), with the creator wearing regular clothes and speaking in a casual, candid style that addresses the audience as a peer, in direct-to-camera speech. Other successful news influencers use props or have memorable visual or verbal signatures or sign-offs to make their videos stand out.

One of the top news creators on TikTok, V Spehar, often reports from under a desk on the aptly named show "@Underthedesknews." Spehar usually starts a video with a conversational greeting like "Hey, y'all, it's Tuesday and here's what's happening," and throws in extra tidbits for loyal followers, who are affectionately referred to as "dust bunnies." Despite the casual approach, the topics can be serious. A recent set of videos featured in-depth reporting on the clashes between U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers and protesters in Los Angeles; another featured a message from U.S. Senator Amy Klobuchar after the politically motivated assasination in mid-June of her friend Melissa Hortman, a Minnesota state lawmaker.

Top news content creators also engage directly with their audiences, often using viewer comments as prompts for follow-up videos. This enhances the feeling that the news is being delivered by "someone like me," and that the journalist is directly accessible. That might run counter to mainstream media norms, but it resonates deeply with a younger generation of news consumers.

These techniques stand in sharp contrast to news organizations whose social media strategy often consists of redistributing TV broadcast clips or using snippets of video over a text story in an attempt to drive viewers back to the organization's homepage.

THE SHIFTING ATTENTION PARADIGM

The average adult worldwide spends more than two hours daily on social media platforms, according to consumer research firm GWI, and they spend about 15% more time watching online video than they do watching television, the longtime media champ.

Meanwhile, per capita newspaper circulation peaked more than 70 years ago in the United States, and the revenues of most local newsrooms have been collapsing for decades.

By contrast, the creator economy, already worth more than $250 billion a year, according to Goldman Sachs, is projected to nearly double by 2027. Although the vast majority of social media content creators are not journalists — platforms are filled with beauty tips, celebrity gossip, and dance trends — news content creators follow a similar formula for monetizing their output: a mix of subscriptions, sponsorships, donations, and merchandise sales. The most successful news influencers can earn money in the seven and eight figures, amounts that were once the domain of the biggest star news anchors. And advertisers are paying attention: WPP Media, the world's largest ad agency, projects that social media platforms will overtake traditional media in ad revenue this year.

Individual creators on social media can reach audiences that rival those of their mass-media predecessors. Smith Galer, for example, has more than half a million followers on her primary platform, TikTok, an estimated 75% of whom are under the age of 34.

Despite this, resistance to these platforms, or at least a tendency not to take them seriously, remains in many corners of the news industry.

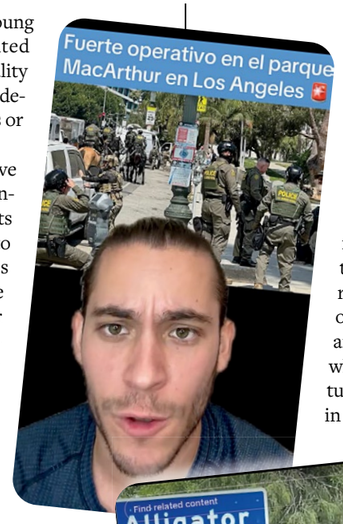
At a recent talk Ben gave in Boston outlining behavioral shifts in news consumption, an attendee made the type of comment he's grown accustomed to hearing from legacy news executives: "So you're saying people are getting dumber, and you think that's great?"

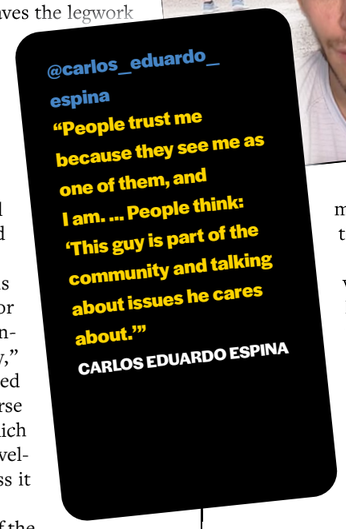
Ben pushes back on this notion. As the former head of editorial at Snapchat, a messaging app that allows users to share photos and videos, he frequently conducted polls among Snapchat's estimated 450 million daily users — the majority in their teens and 20s — and found they regularly expressed a high interest in news and wanted to see more of it on the platform.

"It was my job to go out and get that news from the folks who make it best: traditional news providers doing great journalism," Ben said, ticking off a roster of established media companies Snapchat partnered with, including The Washington Post and NBC News. Despite these successful partnerships, there was still a persistent industry trope regarding social media that Ben summed up as: "Snap and platforms like them are silly and the young people who use them are vapid; we're cooking up nutritious meals and they only want cake."

He came to view this disconnect as a broken supply-and-demand relationship: young Snapchat users said they wanted news, yet some producers of quality journalism continued to insist the demographic didn't care about news or was too difficult to reach.

Both of us (Ben and Ryan) have encountered a similar lack of urgency among many legacy news outlets to engage with these platforms or to grasp the existential threat of this shifting attention paradigm, while content creators like Smith Galer seem to understand it instinctively: "Rather than expecting my audience to find my journalism," she said, "I work really hard to make sure that my journalism finds them."





TIKTOK

A BRIGHT SPOT IN A SHRINKING INDUSTRY

News organizations that spent decades and vast resources on "web-first journalism" in hopes of driving traffic to their websites are starting to see on-platform work in the social media universe supplant their content. In a grim irony, a number of news influencers take information from traditional outlets and repackage it for their audiences, often without attribution, which critics say effectively leaves the legwork and cost of original reporting to be borne by others.

But supporters of news content creators point out that legacy media outlets, such as cable news, are often guilty of the same thing, and creators who break stories on social media are not always credited when a story goes viral.

Liz Kelly Nelson, who runs Project C, an organization "for journalists navigating the independent creator economy," said the lack of clear or accepted guidelines in the nascent universe of news content creators — which she and others are hoping to develop — is not a reason to dismiss it wholesale.

"What is the ultimate goal of the original reporting that these [traditional] news sites are doing?" she asked. "Is it to have an impact and reach a scaled audience? And if it is, then maybe it's a good thing."

Trying to catch up to the new reality, some legacy outlets are experimenting with various approaches, although figuring out a smart way to enter the creator space and make money from it remains a challenge.

In a first for the industry, The Washington Post's in-house social media news creator, journalist Dave Jorgenson, struck a deal with his employer in early 2025 to host a new YouTube series directly on his own channel instead of the channel run by The Post. While the distinction might be lost on outsiders, it represents a new frontier in the battle over who owns the relationship with an audience that a reporter develops while working for a well-known institution. Although Jorgenson announced in July he is leaving The Post, deals like this may soon become more commonplace.

News influencers who work hard to cultivate large social media audiences now view their follower counts as bargaining chips that are just as valuable as, or even more important than, assets like years of work experience.

"I just turned down a job this week," said Jackson Gosnell, a 21-year-old college student and news creator from Greenville, South Carolina, when we spoke to him this spring. The television station that had extended an offer, Gosnell said, "viewed my social media content as competition."

Gosnell, who conducts interviews across platforms and whose Instagram page features him posing with President Trump and various members of the administration, had hoped to use his social media work as a résumé builder for a television news job. But when a recent interviewer told him that he needed to shut down his personal accounts as a condition of getting hired, Gosnell not only refused, but viewed the request as shortsighted in a rapidly evolving media landscape.

"It seems like they're just closing their eyes and hoping we go back to 1984, when everyone has a cable subscription and watches the news," Gosnell said. "I don't think it's going to happen. I think people need to adapt, and they're not doing it quickly enough." ■

NETANYAHU VS. THE ISRAELI MEDIA

Critics see "a master plan to destroy the free media in Israel"

BY DINA KRAFT

In the early 1980s, Benjamin Netanyahu made a splash as a telegenic young diplomat in Washington and at the United Nations, out to shape international opinion on Israel with his silver tongue and fluent English. He was a regular on ABC's "Nightline" and the Sunday morning news talk shows, and kept a meticulous list of the country's media elites, whom he courted assiduously.

Forty years later, Netanyahu is Israel's longest-serving prime minister, an embattled leader who has unleashed unprecedented levels of military force in Gaza and against Iran while simultaneously fighting corruption charges at home. And now, critics say, he seems determined not just to influence the news media but to try to control it.

Following a playbook similar to Donald Trump's in the U.S. or Narendra Modi's in India, Netanyahu's government has banned or boycotted news organizations whose reporting he dislikes or denounces as a threat to national security, while elevating outlets that toe the official line. He wants to privatize Israel's public broadcaster, which he accuses of not being "balanced enough," and has tightly restricted journalists' access to Gaza. He complains of a "deep state" at work against him, including the media, which he once likened in court to "Pravda."

He's gone after individual reporters, such as Raviv Drucker, one of Israel's top investigative journalists and a 2003 Nieman Fellow. Drucker was first targeted a decade ago after breaking a story that led to one of the corruption cases for which Netanyahu is currently standing trial.

"No prime minister before Netanyahu ever mentioned journalists by name, but Netanyahu changed all the rules of the game," says Drucker. "He named everyone, put us all on a political side … as if we are all activists set on toppling him who pretend to be professionals. We've gotten used to it now, but then, we were shocked."

That was at the outset of what longtime media watchers describe as a systematic campaign by Netanyahu to undermine independent media since his party returned to power in 2015. His effort to suppress opposition and accountability journalism intensified in 2023, as the government tried to exert greater control over the courts — sparking months of the largest street protests in Israeli history — and, more recently, after Hamas' devastating Oct. 7 attack.

Netanyahu's far-right coalition has helped bolster the reach of the cable news station most loyal to its agenda, introduced legislation targeting prominent television news channels, banned Al Jazeera as a "mouthpiece for Hamas," raided the organization's offices, and boycotted Haaretz, Israel's oldest daily newspaper.

"It's a master plan to destroy the free media in Israel," warns Anat Saragusti, who oversees press freedom issues at the Union of Journalists in Israel.

The prime minister's office did not respond to requests for comment.

ISRAEL'S FOX NEWS

Besides attacking news organizations critical of his leadership, Netanyahu has steadily promoted outlets that parrot the government's views, starting with the newspaper Israel Today, which was financed and founded in 2007 — reportedly at Netanyahu's request — by Sheldon Adelson, the American billionaire casino magnate. Adelson's Israeli-born widow is the paper's publisher.

The couple has been well-known for funding right-wing candidates in the United States, most famously Trump. But they have also spent hundreds of millions of dollars helping to boost Netanyahu's political ambitions.

Israel Today is distributed free in print and online, which has helped it surpass the competition, notably the daily Yediot Ahronoth, which Netanyahu has bemoaned for its critical coverage of him and his government. In one of the corruption cases against him, prosecutors allege that Netanyahu was so obsessed with his image in the media that he once offered Yediot Ahronoth's owner a deal where the government would propose legislation to stymie Israel Today's growth in exchange for more favorable coverage.

Since Adelson died in 2021, Israel Today has maintained its right-wing stance but is more critical of Netanyahu and his government than it was in the past. But the paper still mostly hews to the government line, whether by generally supporting its strategy in the Gaza war or downplaying settler violence in the West Bank. A 2020 University of Chicago study suggested that the newspaper's impact was so deep that it played a significant role in shifting Israeli voters further rightward, helping to secure Netanyahu's dominance of Israeli politics.

More recently, Netanyahu has helped transform an obscure Jewish heritage-themed cable station into a high-profile pro-government voice in the public conversation. Owned by Yitzchak Mirilashvili — whose billionaire father, Michael, immigrated to Israel and is one of its richest citizens — Channel 14 is best-known for defending and amplifying the messaging of the Netanyahu government. Yinon Magal, the pugnacious face of the station, once described himself as the prime minister's willing "vessel."

In recent years, Netanyahu has given almost all of his TV interviews to Channel 14, shutting out mainstream stations like Channel 12, Israel's most popular news network. Channel 14 now ranks second.

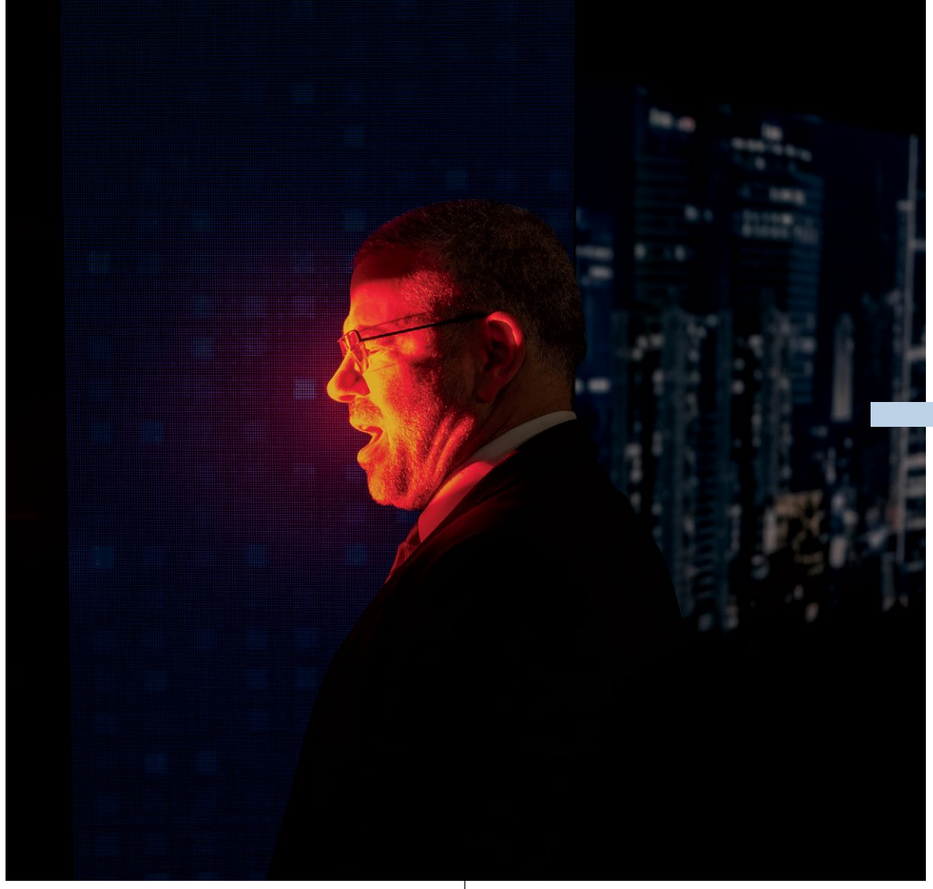
Its rise was boosted by government advertising and official perks reportedly worth millions of dollars. In 2016, regulatory amendments allowed the previously heritage-only station to air more news broadcasts, while in 2018 it was exempted from obligations to invest in local production, which other major channels must obey. Channel 14 was also not subjected to guidelines on editorial balance and journalistic ethics, critics say.

"This makes it easier for them to operate and amplifies their voice in the public sphere as they routinely compare Channel 12 to Al Jazeera," says Adam Shinhar, a law professor at Israel's Reichman University.

Channel 14's flagship nightly show, "The Patriots," is hosted by Magal, a former anchor on Israel's public broadcaster, whose stint as a right-wing lawmaker in Israel's parliament was cut short by allegations of sexual harassment. (Magal was unavailable for comment.) The Seventh Eye, an investigative Israeli news site that covers media and freedom of the press, says Channel 14 "regularly broadcasts fake news, incitement to violence, and government propaganda."

In May, three Israeli NGOs petitioned the Israeli Supreme Court to demand a criminal investigation into Channel 14 for what the groups allege are hundreds of statements aired on the channel during the Gaza war that amount to incitement to genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.

Among the quotes cited in the suit, from commentators on the channel, are declarations that "Gaza as it exists today must be wiped out"; "we need to bomb indiscriminately"; "we're coming to destroy you. D-E-S-T-R-O-Y. Destroy. Share this, spread the video clip so your



AMIT ELKAYAM

Israeli journalist Yinon Magal, left, is an outspoken host on Channel 14, an outlet that amplifies the messaging of the Netanyahu government. Magal once described himself as Netanyahu's willing "vessel."

PREVIOUS PAGE: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at an award ceremony in Jerusalem in 2016. Media watchers say Netanyahu has waged a decade-long campaign to undermine Israel's independent media.

PREVIOUS PAGE: AMIR COHEN/REUTERS

HAITHAM IMAD/EPA-EFE/SHUTTERSTOCK

Mourners attend a December 2023 funeral in Gaza for Samer Abu Daqqa, a Palestinian journalist killed while working for Al Jazeera. Israeli media has done little reporting on the death toll in Gaza, where local officials say over 52,000 people have been killed in the war.

friends know what we're going to do to you"; and "the more humane solution is to starve them, OK?"

One way the channel echoes government messaging is through its coverage, or lack of coverage, of the plight of Israeli hostages in Gaza and the weekly, sometimes daily mass protests demanding their return. Channel 14 sticks to Netanyahu's line that only continued military action will achieve the hostages' release and Hamas' eradication, eschewing the idea of a truce and an exchange of Israeli hostages for Palestinian prisoners. The channel's journalists and guests have not only attacked those who support a hostage deal but also lashed out against some of the hostages' families, according to Seventh Eye.

Channel 14 also amplifies Netanyahu's message that the army and security services, rather than the government, bear full blame for the catastrophic intelligence failure that allowed the Oct. 7 attack to happen.

"Netanyahu has put disproportionate energy and time and effort" into swaying media coverage, says Tehilla Shwartz Altshuler, a senior fellow at the nonpartisan Israel Democracy Institute. "Very sadly, it's kind of worked. And the bottom line is he has succeeded in controlling two media outlets" — Channel 14 and Israel Today.

To be sure, mainstream news organizations have continued to criticize Netanyahu's handling of the hostage crisis and to question whether he has used the elusive goal of "total victory" over Hamas as a means of staying in power and putting off an official inquiry into the Oct. 7 attack. Hamas' multipronged assault across the Gaza border, which killed about 1,200 people and took 251 hostage, was the deadliest attack on Israel since the Jewish state was founded in 1948.

But there has been little reporting or reflection on the devastating death toll and humanitarian situation in Gaza, where local health officials say over 52,000 people have been killed in the war. Israeli media outlets are "scared of a drop in their ratings or do not want to lose advertisers and viewers, so [they] have to toe a line of overall patriotism," says Reichman University's Shinhar.

On top of that is a strict regime of censorship of stories deemed harmful to national security, which critics say is broadly defined. In 2024, Israel's military censor banned the publication of 1,635 stories and redacted material in another 6,265, the Israeli-Palestinian news outlet +972 Magazine reported in May. This was the highest incidence of intervention since the outlet began collecting such data in 2011.

For Netanyahu, paying zealous attention to the media traces back to his younger days.

As a diplomat in the U.S., he courted not only the American press but also the Israeli journalists based there. Yediot Ahronoth profiled him in a splashy piece in its weekend magazine after he started dazzling many at the United Nations with his speeches soon after his appointment as ambassador to the U.N. in 1984. When he traveled home to Israel, he was known for making the rounds of newspaper offices, meeting with editors and reporters.

But upon returning from the U.N. and reinventing himself as an ambitious member of the right-wing Likud party, he was soon eyed warily by Israeli journalists, who were mistrustful of his nationalist politics wrapped in American-style polish and soundbites. Netanyahu had picked up fluent English during his teen years in suburban Philadelphia, where his father, a history professor, had found work.

"They hated him from Day 1, and he fought back in so many long-term, sophisticated ways," says Altshuler.

One of those ways now is to bypass traditional news outlets, deftly using social media and loyalist outlets to speak directly to the country, especially his base. Another strategy has been to try to overhaul the media landscape through legislation.

LEGISLATIVE ATTACK

When Netanyahu returned to power in January 2023 after a brief ouster, one of the first things his new communications minister, Shlomo Karhi, did was to roll out a plan to shake up the television market. Karhi is considered close not just to Netanyahu but also to his older son, Yair, a controversial figure who often takes the lead in online attacks against his father's adversaries.

"The era of hyperactive regulation is over. Less intervention, more competition and freedom," Karhi said in announcing his plans. "We will eliminate intervention in the business model, grow the advertising market, and encourage the opening of new content channels."

The tactic was to "flood the zone" with bills, among them one that would give the government control of the TV ratings system. Currently, a widely trusted independent committee oversees ratings and, in turn, how much advertisers can be charged.

"The government wants to control it because then they can decide who gets public money for advertising. This would specifically benefit Channel 14, which aligns with Netanyahu's worldview, politics, and ideology," says Saragusti of the Union of Journalists in Israel.

Another bill aims to privatize Kan, the country's public broadcaster, which Karhi complains has veered too far to the left. Karhi has declared that there's "no place for public broadcasting" in Israel, claiming — erroneously — that there is no public broadcasting in the U.S.

Karhi's office did not respond to requests for comment.

"Netanyahu wants two things now," says Altshuler. "He wants Channel 14 to continue to thrive, which means giving it as many regulatory benefits as possible, but he also wants chaos in the media market so it's on the defense all the time. He wants journalists to feel that the workplace is not secure."

That includes trying to punish news outlets he doesn't like.

HAARETZ AND AL JAZEERA

In the crosshairs has been Haaretz newspaper, founded in 1919, two decades before Israel declared statehood, making it the country's oldest publication. Israel's paper of record and a left-wing bastion in an increasingly right-wing society, Haaretz has long been an outspoken critic of Netanyahu and his successive coalitions over the years.

Early in the Gaza war, Karhi wrote a Cabinet resolution calling for a government boycott of Haaretz, declaring it

"[HE] WANTS CHAOS IN THE MEDIA MARKET SO IT'S ON THE DEFENSE ALL THE TIME. HE WANTS JOURNALISTS TO FEEL THAT THE WORKPLACE IS NOT SECURE."

Tehilla Shwartz Altshuler
Senior fellow, Israel Democracy Institute

Raviv Drucker, a prominent Israeli investigative reporter, has been targeted by Netanyahu since breaking a story that led to one of the corruption cases for which the prime minister is standing trial. Drucker says no leader before Netanyahu "ever mentioned journalists by name, but [he] changed all the rules of the game."

time to outlaw media organizations that were "helping the enemy by undermining public morale in wartime."

The Justice Ministry blocked the resolution on grounds that it violated press freedom. But a few months later, Amos Schocken, the newspaper's publisher and owner, made a highly controversial statement referring to Palestinian militants as "freedom fighters" — a statement that Haaretz's editorial board rejected and Schocken himself walked back.

Karhi seized the opening to pursue the boycott, canceling government offices' subscriptions and forbidding any government advertising. "The decision came in the wake of many articles that damaged the legitimacy of the State of Israel in the world and its right to self-defense," Karhi said.

Shinhar at Reichman University says that Haaretz is being made an example of. "It sends a message to other newspapers that this might be what you could face if you criticize the government."

Aluf Benn, the newspaper's editor-in-chief, struck back in an op-ed piece headlined "Haaretz Will Not Be Silenced by Netanyahu." He described how Haaretz reporters had rushed to cover the Oct. 7 attack, some barely escaping the massacre themselves or losing friends and relatives in the onslaught.

"We have never faced such an emotional and professional challenge in the newsroom. But despite the unprecedented difficulty, we had to stand by and fulfill our journalistic mission to report the broadest possible story about the war," Benn wrote. That meant not just reporting the trauma in Israel, including the hostages' plight, but what "was happening on the other side" in Gaza.

"We are not terrorized or terrified by Netanyahu's threats and his efforts to delegitimize our journalism and strangle Haaretz financially. We will stick to our critical mission to stand for human and civil rights and to expose government wrongdoing and war crimes. This is our duty — even more so when Israel is at war."

Another news organization targeted by Netanyahu's government is the influential Qatar-based Al Jazeera, the most widely broadcast news station in the Arab world. Netanyahu and members of his government have accused it of being a Hamas "mouthpiece."

Al Jazeera has played an outsized role in war coverage inside Gaza, where international journalists have been barred from reporting except as embeds of the Israeli army, on the grounds that any other arrangement could harm national security. During these officially controlled visits, there is usually no opportunity to talk to residents or to independently verify claims made by either side.

Netanyahu's government has sponsored and passed a so-called Al Jazeera Law stipulating that any foreign media organization in the country can be shut down if it poses a threat to security. The law also allows Israel to temporarily seize equipment on national security grounds. This is what happened to The Associated Press, after it provided images via a live video feed to Al Jazeera, one of its thousands of clients. The move was denounced by opposition leader Yair Lapid as an "an act of madness."

MEDIA ACCESS TO GAZA

The Committee to Protect Journalists and the Foreign Press Association, representing Israel-based foreign correspondents, have repeatedly called for media access to Gaza. The FPA has even gone to the Supreme Court to demand access, but the government has repeatedly asked for extensions in filing its response.

In an op-ed in Haaretz in May, the FPA renewed its call for Israel to lift what it called an "unprecedented media blockade."

"These unprecedented restrictions have severely hindered independent reporting, robbing the world of a full picture of the situation in Gaza and placing an undue and dangerous burden on our Palestinian colleagues in the territory. These journalists have risked their lives to keep the world informed of this crucial story," the FPA wrote previously.

The absence of foreign correspondents in Gaza has put even greater pressure on local reporters. By CPJ's count, more than 160 journalists and media workers have been killed in Gaza since the beginning of the war.

Tania Kramer, Jerusalem-based correspondent for Deutsche Welle and chairperson of the FPA, says, "Palestinian journalists in Gaza have done a tremendous job during the war. These journalists have continued to work for international media, braving extremely difficult conditions to continue reporting, the likes of which few veteran war reporters have experienced. They faced the constant threat of Israeli bombardment and had a hard time moving around in an extremely dangerous environment."

Many of the reporters are themselves victims of Israel's devastating military campaign, Kramer notes. "They were displaced, often living in tents without sufficient basic supplies or any support for their work, and they had to care for their families. Some have lost family members and colleagues. So in many ways they often had to report on what they essentially experienced themselves."

ATTACK ON CHANNEL 13 — AND RAVIV DRUCKER

Inside Israel, independent media have begun banding together to fight back against the Netanyahu government's efforts to undermine or muzzle them.

Last summer, Israeli journalists rallied against the decision by Channel 13 to cancel the news program "Warzone," the station's most popular show, hosted by investigative journalist Drucker, who has uncovered several of the most damning Netanyahu-related scandals over the years. The channel's stated reason was that it wanted to put a non-news show in that time slot.

The cancellation — which the channel later reversed, citing the ongoing Gaza war and need for extra coverage — came after Yulia Shamalov-Berkovich, a Netanyahu ally and former lawmaker from his Likud party, was appointed to head Channel 13's news division, despite having no journalism experience. The channel itself was bought years earlier at Netanyahu's behest by another Israeli oligarch, Len Blavatnik, a Ukraine-born billionaire.

Under the banner "Emergency Conference to Save Channel 13," journalists from across platforms came together to protest "Warzone's" cancellation and Shamalov-Berkovich's appointment as news director, which they characterized as a de facto political takeover of the station. The Union of Journalists in Israel and the Channel 13 employees' committee have petitioned the Supreme Court to review the legality of Shamalov-Berkovich's appointment.

"Our biggest enemy is the feeling that we're up against a powerful, sophisticated monster, that we are no match for it, and that there is no point to the struggle," Drucker told the crowd at the protest in support of his canceled show.

In an interview, Drucker said Netanyahu had broken the unspoken rule that government figures should not boycott or shun specific journalists. Drucker and others have gradually found themselves frozen out of interviews and briefings with officials. The situation has become so dire that Drucker says neither he nor his Channel 13 colleagues get any inside access to the prime minister's office.

"I was not very friendly with [Ariel] Sharon or [Ehud] Olmert," says Drucker, referring to previous Israeli premiers, "but their offices cooperated and briefed me, even if they did not give me scoops."

The most recent of Drucker's Netanyahu-related coups was to co-produce the documentary film "The Bibi Files," which contains videos showing Netanyahu, his wife Sara, and his son Yair undergoing police questioning over corruption charges. Screenings in Israel have been blocked because of privacy laws regarding the publication of police interrogations.

Netanyahu's office sent letters to the attorney general and the police demanding that they open a criminal investigation against Drucker, which they have not done.

Drucker says the attacks by Netanyahu don't deter him. But he is concerned that the silencing tactics might affect others, whether journalists or members of the public.

"Those who do speak out are accused of not being patriotic enough or helping the enemy," he says.

Saragusti of the Union of Journalists in Israel is likewise concerned: "When journalists come to cover events, whether in live broadcasts or otherwise, you see people inciting against them, cursing at them, shouting at and intimidating them. … Even if all the [government's media] legislation is not passed, you will have investigative journalists who will say, 'I don't want to go into this minefield.'"

Although Netanyahu's campaign against the media gets less attention from the public than his government's attempts to overhaul the courts, it can be seen as part of the same effort to push Israel toward autocracy, critics say.

Israel's main media players "understand that this is a blueprint," says Saragusti. Recently, top editors from rival mainstream news organizations gathered on Zoom to compare notes and discuss how best to fight back against the government's coordinated attack on independent journalism.

"They see something much bigger than this or that piece of legislation and so they work together," Saragusti says. "They understand they have to show some kind of solidarity." ■

CHAIM GOLDBERG/FLASH90

NETANYAHU'S GOVERNMENT HAS PASSED A SO-CALLED AL JAZEERA LAW STIPULATING THAT ANY FOREIGN MEDIA ORGANIZATION IN ISRAEL CAN BE SHUT DOWN IF IT POSES A THREAT TO SECURITY.

‘A UNIQUE MODEL OF JOURNALISM’

+972 Magazine, an Israeli-Palestinian news collaborative, is recognized for its investigative reporting

In May, the 2025 Nieman class honored +972 Magazine — an unusual Israeli-Palestinian collaboration whose mission is to provide in-depth reporting “from the ground in Israel-Palestine” — with the Louis M. Lyons Award for Conscience and Integrity in Journalism. The 24 Nieman Fellows lauded the nonprofit investigative news organization for its relentless and courageous efforts to “document the human cost of war and occupation.”

+972 Magazine’s work has exposed deadly military practices in the Israel-Hamas war, including the use of artificial intelligence and drones, and the targeting of working journalists in Gaza and the West Bank. The online outlet takes its name from the telephone code that is shared by Israelis and Palestinians.

“At a time when dialogue has all but collapsed, +972 Magazine’s binational team proves that journalists can build bridges and narrow divides by showcasing perspectives that are overlooked or marginalized by mainstream narratives,” said Sandrine Rigaud, a member of the Nieman class of ’25, in presenting the Lyons Award.

Below are excerpts from a conversation between the Nieman Fellows and +972 Magazine editor-in-chief Ghousoon Bisharat, investigative reporter Yuval Abraham, and New York-based editor Jonathan Adler during the online Lyons Award ceremony on May 7.

The comments have been edited for length and clarity.

ON CREATING A BINATIONAL NEWSROOM MODEL IN A POLARIZED REGION

Ghousoon Bisharat: We created a unique model of journalism, one that is fiercely independent. ... We have always strived to produce professional, fact-based reporting and analysis on Israel-Palestine.

But we also know that in journalism, context and framing are key. Connecting the dots is one of the most important principles of our journalism. Long before October 7, Israel erased the Green Line and consolidated a single regime between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, which is based on Jewish supremacy and a permanent domination over Palestinians. For years, +972 Magazine has constantly sought to connect the dots to show what is happening across all of Israel-Palestine.

What is very unique to our binational project is that we all have a very clear political commitment and ideological commitment to equity and justice for all living in Israel and Palestine.

It is definitely not easy to be part of a binational project. At this time, in particular, it’s never easy. But we have a huge network of writers and contributors who believe in our mission.

ON THEIR COLLEAGUES REPORTING FROM GAZA

Bisharat: I honestly don’t know how they can keep going. You know, if I were in that situation, I wouldn’t be able to go and report and handle editors who ask a million questions about the facts and checking the information ... every time we publish something. One of our reporters in Gaza [is] Ibtisam Mahdi — she’s a mother of two children, and they’re similar to the ages of my kids. And when her main mission every day now is to bring some food home — [to] what used to be a home; now it’s partially destroyed and she lives in one small room — I honestly don’t know how she can keep going.

ON THE IMPACT OF THEIR WORK

Yuval Abraham: The reactions to some of the investigations that I wrote have been really completely different internationally and in Israeli society. In Israel, I think actions went largely from disregarding the investigations to, I would even say, among the mainstream, somehow a feeling of almost pride in some of [what] the investigations [exposed] — that the military is sophisticated technologically or that the military is fierce and harsh.

I remember reading the comments on some of the follow-ups that we got because the Israeli mainstream media reported about it. It wasn’t from a critical perspective, but often from the perspective of “This is happening and it’s good that it’s happening.” This was a change for me because usually, I think, before October 7th, often we would write an investigation or an article and then there would be a kind of factual debate about it in the Israeli society; people would say the reporting isn’t accurate. Here, I felt that the reporting was not being contested amongst the mainstream media. ... It was just something that we are either disregarding, or accepting and even appreciative of. ... We always say, “Truth to power,” right? That exposing truth will have some effects on power, on the military, on the government. But I really feel we’re living in a situation where exposing that truth, especially in the Israeli context but also in the United States, has had very little effect on power.

JAMAL AWAD/FLASH90

Palestinian children play at a school funded by UNRWA, a United Nations agency that supports Palestinian refugees, in Silwan, a neighborhood in East Jerusalem, on Jan. 30, 2024.

ON THE EFFECTS OF CENSORSHIP

Abraham: The media outlets that are based in Israel, we are subject to censorship laws. When we are reporting on issues that are related to the military or to intelligence, we have to send the reporting to these military censors, which then can choose to basically interfere in the story in different ways. The censor can erase the entire story and tell us we’re not allowed to publish it, or it can erase certain sentences or paragraphs in the story. ... If the censor interferes in a story that you’re writing, you have to respect it. And you cannot write in the story that “I was not allowed to publish more because of the Israeli military censor.”

Also, it affects the way sometimes we approach the reporting because there are certain stories that I would feel have a lot of public value, but when I speak to ... my editors, we are already thinking: Is it worth it to spend weeks and months reporting and investigating this story if, at the end, the censor will just not allow us to publish it? So there’s this form of self-censorship where we are already thinking, what will the censor maybe say?

Jonathan Adler: We publish an annual piece on censorship that Haggai Matar, who’s our executive director, has taken the task of compiling each year. In 2023, the military censor banned the publication of around 600 articles. That was the highest number we had ever seen in the history of +972 tracking this since 2011. This year [it] was up to 1,600 articles that were completely banned and over 6,000 ... [where] parts were redacted. Part of that is a result of [an] increase in the ... number of articles submitted to the military censor. But it sort of speaks to the degree of repression.

ON THE PURSUIT OF OBJECTIVITY VS. ACCURACY

Bisharat: I personally do not believe in objectivity. We believe in accurate and fair journalism. But that does not mean that things are not complex here. ... It’s not all black and white, and we deal with complexity within the Israeli society, within the Palestinian society, and we are not shy of doing that.

We accept this [Lyons] Award not as a pat on the back, but as a call to keep going, to keep reporting when the news cycle moves on. So to the Nieman Foundation and to each one of the Nieman Fellows of [the] class [of] ’25, thank you. ... We accept this award with deep gratitude and with renewed commitment to the work ahead. ■

LIGHTS OUT

The end of U.S. support for global media casts a long shadow over journalism worldwide

BY DANNY FENSTER
ILLUSTRATION BY DOUG CHAYKA

In the 12 years since Radio Rozana's first broadcast, founder Lina Chawaf has worked tirelessly to expand the outlet's coverage of her native Syria. She was forced to flee the country in 2011 after former President Bashar Assad began cracking down on independent media in the wake of the Arab Spring, yet still managed to broadcast from neighboring Turkey with the help of grants from several Western aid groups.

The outlet received a significant boost in 2024 when it was awarded a $120,000 grant from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). It allowed Chawaf's small operation to nearly double its staff by hiring 10 reporters to help cover the country's decade-old civil war at a critical juncture.

The joy was short-lived. One of President Donald Trump's first acts in his second term was to sign an executive order freezing access to USAID's funds, setting in motion a series of shocks throughout a global media ecosystem that is still struggling to adapt to a chaotic new reality. In March, Chawaf received an email saying USAID was pulling the plug on the majority of its projects.

"We are freaking out," said Chawaf, a 2025 Nieman Fellow. "We're now scrambling to fill this budget hole to keep this going. We have been covering [Syria's] most pressing problems and how to solve them. This could mean we cannot do that anymore."

Chawaf's operation is one of the hundreds of news outlets affected by Trump's executive order in January. Since then, additional moves targeting the United States Agency for Global Media (USAGM) and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) have signaled a dramatic reversal — and possible death knell — for decades-old U.S. programs supporting free speech and access to information around the world.

Historically, less than one half of 1% of U.S. foreign aid has gone to supporting independent media, through USAID and related programs — yet the hundreds of millions of dollars that represents made it the largest public donor to media development in the world.

For half a century, the U.S. has pursued an often controversial policy of "democracy promotion," one strain of which has included support for civil society initiatives such as independent newsrooms in places where free speech and access to outside information are forcibly curtailed. With the Trump administration's dismantling of USAID, USAGM, and NED in particular, the full scope of that support is just now coming into focus. In recent years, for example, USAID alone has helped support more than 6,000 journalists, 700 newsrooms, and about 300 other media organizations across 30 or so countries, according to Reporters Without Borders.

The administration's actions have had immediate consequences within the U.S. as well: With the freeze on USAGM's funding in March, scores of Washington-based foreign reporters were suddenly left jobless or in limbo. Many of them had come to Washington not only to help report on the U.S. government for their home audiences, but also to use American free speech protections to report on corruption and repression in their own countries. Now, although Trump's order faces numerous legal challenges, many worry their visas could be invalidated, leaving them vulnerable to deportation into the clutches of the oligarchs and autocrats they reported on.

"I know of at least another 50 journalists with visas tied to their jobs at VOA [Voice of America]. Many are from authoritarian governments and are at risk of being sent back," said Liam Scott, who reported on global press freedom for the 80-year-old, USAGM-funded broadcast outlet before the funding freeze. He now authors the Press Freedom Report newsletter on Substack.

In addition to VOA, the USAGM oversees Radio Marti in Cuba, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty in Eastern Europe, Radio Free Asia, and Middle East Broadcasting Networks — several of which find themselves in crisis.

"We broadcast to some of the most censored places on Earth, where we model what a free press really looks like," Scott said. "This covers huge swaths of the global population that will lose out on independent news. This is really important to a huge chunk of the world."

Current events have reframed the issue, to a degree. After Israel launched a series of attacks on Iranian nuclear sites in June, the Trump administration ordered reporters back into the VOA's Persian-language news service, which had been shuttered by Trump's executive order in March.

A perilous time

ON JANUARY 20, hours into his second presidency, Trump signed an executive order demanding the U.S. end all aid not "fully aligned with the foreign policy of the President." This included $268 million allocated by Congress for "independent media and the free flow of information," according to Reporters Without Borders. Days later, administrators at NED — which had also provided reporting grants around the world — lost access to $240 million in funds that Congress had appropriated. On March 14, Trump signed another executive order ending all federal programs he deemed "unnecessary," including eliminating "to the maximum extent" allowed by law all USAGM operations.

In less than three months, under the direction of the Elon Musk-led Department of Government Efficiency, the administration effectively dismantled these organizations, leaving reporting projects gutted, abruptly canceled, or in limbo.

Each order has sparked a series of lawsuits that are still making their way through U.S. courts, but for many newsrooms operating on tight budgets, continuing through the delays will not be feasible. It is difficult to say just how many journalists have lost their jobs as a result, or how many newsrooms either have already shut down or will soon have to, but the freeze has hit outlets in Russia and Ukraine, in the Balkans and Eastern Europe, in Cameroon and Iran, and across Latin America and elsewhere, leaving them struggling to plug unexpected budget holes at a time of dramatic geopolitical change, shrinking global press freedoms, and rising authoritarianism.

For news operations like Chawaf's Radio Rozana, the cuts come at a critical moment: Syria is just now emerging from more than a decade of civil war after Syrian rebels toppled Assad, who fled to Moscow in December. "You cannot cede ground to radicals at a moment like this. You need media that is independent and able to inform people. You need credible information," Chawaf said. "I'm worried — we don't know where we are going right now."

The U.S. has played a particularly outsized role in supporting non-state media in Myanmar, since at least as early as 1988, when journalists fled military crackdowns on pro-democracy protests and established in exile what remain some of the country's most prominent news outlets. That support continued during the country's brief opening, between 2011 and 2021, and through its current crisis — an ongoing civil war sparked by a 2021 military coup. I helped cover that coup as editor of Frontier Myanmar, a locally owned English-language magazine that received a small USAID grant that helped us cover the 2020 election that preceded the military junta's takeover.

Journalism in Myanmar was never lucrative, and many reporters there supplement their incomes with odd jobs. But the recent cuts have caused a ripple effect, and while many desperately want to continue reporting on their country, nearly all of them are struggling to find ways to do so.

"Many of the journalists who cover this country are now selling food or running little tea shops and things. Some of them did this before Trump, but now they are all doing it all the time," said Yan Naing Aung, a fixer and freelance reporter and photographer who has worked with The Washington Post and Nikkei Asia, among other outlets. "The ones who have been in journalism a long time, or even some of those who became passionate about it after the coup — they will continue to report even if they don't get paid. But many are walking away from [journalism] because they have to."

OZAN KOSE/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Lina Chawaf in the Gaziantep, Turkey office of Radio Rozana, an outlet she founded to cover her native Syria. A grant from USAID was helping her expand coverage and add staff at a pivotal moment in Syria's history, but she was recently notified the grant was being canceled.

Yan Naing Aung said he thinks the situation is also affecting coverage of Myanmar by international outlets. With less local reporting taking place, regional and international reporters and outlets stop paying attention to the country, he said. Even if they are paying attention, there are now fewer trained fixers and journalists whom they can reach out to for assistance.

According to an April report from the Singapore-based ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, a majority of the country's largest newsrooms have lost between 30% and

35% of their funding because of the cuts in U.S. support. For smaller outlets in the country and in exile, where U.S. support counted for even larger percentages of their budgets, the impact has been even greater.

The Independent Press Council of Myanmar estimates that about 200 journalists in exile have been affected by the cuts.

The consequences have already been felt: On March 28, the largest earthquake to hit Myanmar in nearly a century struck its central heartlands, destroying buildings and infrastructure, killing more than 3,500 people, and injuring an estimated 5,000. While there was scant international coverage of the ensuing humanitarian situation, the crumbling of a half-built office tower in Bangkok — the capital of neighboring Thailand nearly 1,000 miles from the earthquake's epicenter — was covered immediately and extensively.

Those who were able to report on the situation in Myanmar did so via news services like Radio Free Asia. I spoke to an RFA contributor originally from the Sagaing Region of Myanmar close to the epicenter, who asked not to be named as he is living and reporting from exile in northern Thailand, where he fled after the 2021 coup.

When the earthquake struck, he was able to reach out to villagers from his hometown in Myanmar to report on the severity of the damage. In the pictures villagers shared with him, he identified the corpse of his own brother, a detail he declined to add to his story.

Danny Fenster worked at Frontier Myanmar, an English-language magazine that was part of a once-robust media ecosystem in the region supported in part by grants from organizations including USAID.

COURTESY OF DANNY FENSTER

But a little more than a month later, the RFA, facing cuts, terminated his role, leaving him stranded in Thailand without work and unable to return home for fear his media work has put him on the junta's radar.

"I have been a journalist since 2013. I love being a journalist," he said. "If I go back to Myanmar, I may have to change my career."

USAID and NED grants have supported more than just reporting; they've also included "capacity building" initiatives in nations without robust support for a free press, including journalist training, technology and business model innovation, internet connectivity, and cross-border investigations of transnational crime, to name a few. Over the last few decades, the administration of such programs has shifted from Western-led initiatives to more locally driven projects. This has created a sprawling ecosystem of government agencies, international NGOs, contractors, local reporters, editors, and technologists.

In Ukraine, for example, 2025 Nieman Fellow Kyrylo Beskorovainyi, co-founder of a science journalism outlet called Kunsht, had five different programs supported by funding from the U.S. before Trump took office.

Among them was an initiative to turn print-based science reporting done during the COVID-19 pandemic into radio features, and another that created video-based reports displayed on screens on intercity trains to increase public health awareness. Another core element of the outlet's work included training Ukrainian scientists to better communicate their research and ideas to the public. Thirty scientists had enrolled in a communications training course that was set to begin earlier this year.

That program, along with the others, has been canceled, forcing Kunsht to terminate everyone involved.

"We are in a very tight spot, with funding for [only] the next few months, but then we'll start burning our reserves," Beskorovainyi said. "We did not plan for this. We are in crisis mode."

Funding "a global campaign for freedom"

THE DRASTIC GUTTING of these programs represents a radical shift in attitude on the part of the U.S. government — under both Democratic and Republican administrations — toward funding initiatives that aim to export U.S.-style democracy around the world.

Much of the rhetoric around exporting democratic values can be traced to a speech by President Ronald Reagan, who took to the lectern in London's Westminster Hall on June 8, 1982, to announce a new "global campaign for freedom."

"The objective I propose is quite simple: to foster the infrastructure of democracy — the system of a free press, unions, political parties, universities — which allows a people to choose their own way," he said. To those who might call this cultural imperialism, Reagan added, it's "cultural condescension, or worse, to say that any people prefer dictatorship to democracy ... [or] government propaganda handouts instead of independent newspapers."

As critics have noted, however, much of what Reagan proposed — funding and training civic and political groups abroad, often selectively — was something the Central Intelligence Agency had been doing clandestinely for decades.

"The idea was a reworking of the CIA's old 1950s policy," writes Nicholas Cull in "The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy, 1945-1989." "But this time the mechanism had to be overt."

That meant getting congressional buy-in and being explicit about funding decisions and objectives. Congressional hearings following the Westminster Hall speech led directly to NED's creation, as well as its granting institutions — representing the Democratic and Republican parties, labor unions, and private businesses.

The difference this time, Cull told me in a recent interview, was that the architects of Reagan's "infrastructure of democracy" understood that "the journalism part of this would only work if it was seen as objective."

"The covert funding was one part of that, but that also crucially depended on the reporting — they had to be able to be critical of the U.S. government," Cull said. If a single story went against the interests of one administration, party, or foreign policy objective, Cull added, the broader goal of having independent journalists reporting on their governments around the world took precedence.

Reagan called on his allies to partner with him, and over the next decade, governments across Europe and East Asia added media support to existing aid programs, like USAID, or launched new ones, like NED. The United Kingdom, for example, created the Westminster Foundation for Democracy in 1992, which trained a generation of journalists across the former Yugoslavia.

For all the rhetoric about freedom and liberty, critics say these programs sometimes aligned too neatly with U.S. geopolitical interests. At Westminster Hall, Reagan spoke at least as much about countering communism as he did about bolstering democracy. USAID, launched in 1961 by President John F. Kennedy, aimed not only to reduce global poverty, but also to counter Soviet support for anticolonial movements across Africa and Asia.

Leftists critical of American imperialism have often found common ground with small-government conservatives worried about waste and overreach. When Trump first took aim at NED, in 2018, the socialist Jacobin Magazine urged readers not to mourn its demise. When Trump won reelection in 2024, The American Conservative magazine called on him to finish the job.

But such criticisms overlook the editorial independence the majority of these outlets achieved. Even the VOA — which was initially created as a tool of U.S. information warfare in 1942 to counter Nazi propaganda — fought for and won its independence. By the 1950s, its journalists were already carving out editorial space independent from the U.S. government.

When VOA chief Robert Goldmann visited the BBC's London office in 1958, he was "simply astonished by the absence of policy pressure from the British Foreign Office," Cull writes. Back in Washington, Goldmann envisioned VOA becoming something similar, a broadcaster of "straight factual reporting without any propaganda." In 1976, a VOA charter codified this independence into law.

While VOA and related USAGM programs may never have achieved the reach of the BBC, they are widely trusted where they operate. In Myanmar, Radio Free Asia is considered a highly credible newsroom, often hiring the country's most accomplished journalists and paying above-average wages. When it appeared that the

Steve Lodge, son of the late Voice of America Capitol Hill correspondent Robert Lodge, stands outside VOA headquarters in Washington, D.C., in March 2025 to protect the Trump administration's decision to slash the news organization's funding.

ANDREW LEYDEN/NURPHOTO VIA AP

lights might go out for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, the government of the Czech Republic, where it is based, pledged to take over financial support of the outlet if the U.S. withdrew, lest the public lose such a vital institution. Since then, the European Union has pledged 5.5 million euros ($6.4 million) in support.

What comes next?

QUESTIONS REMAIN, not only about the future of the current system, but about what role, if any, the U.S. should play in funding foreign media.

Patrick Boehler, an American journalist who has worked for several U.S. grantees in Asia, as well as larger outlets like The New York Times and the South China Morning Post, has criticized the system in his newsletter about global civic media called Re:filtered. In addition to bureaucratic grant processes that can be cumbersome to small news outlets already stretched thin, Boehler says the foreign aid system enables a universe of middlemen between grantors and recipients that siphons off meager funding.

Author Cull, although a supporter of Western funding for foreign media, agrees there is room for improvement.

"To be honest, it wasn't an ideal system," Cull said. "People trying to run truly free media in vulnerable places would say, 'If we have to reapply for a grant every six months, how do we concentrate on the reporting?' They felt they were on a kind of hamster wheel with tremendous uncertainty."

While Boehler is hopeful that something better might emerge from the current crisis, he is sympathetic to the pain he's watching journalists endure as they grapple with the abrupt end of a huge funding source.

"They are seeing that they'd been playing this game of chasing grants for so long, and now that it stopped, they're saying, 'I don't want to do this anymore,'" Boehler said. "They're asking how they can get real independence, and those are really great conversations to have." ■

NIEMAN NOTES

1982

Steve Oney is the author of a new book, "On Air: The Triumph and Tumult of NPR." Oney spent 14 years writing the book, which chronicles the history of National Public Radio since its founding in 1970.

1988

Rosental Alves accepted the 2024 Great Friend of the Press Award from the Inter American Press Association (IAPA) on behalf of the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas. Alves is founder and director of the center, which is based at the University of Texas at Austin.

1995

Chemi Che-Mponda Kadete was honored last year by the president of Tanzania and the Tanzanian government for her pioneering work with the Tanzania Media Women's Association (TAMWA).

2006

Beena Sarwar directed the documentary "Democracy in Debt: Sri Lanka Beyond the Headlines," which has been screened and discussed in more than 50 locations around the world. Supported by the Pulitzer Center, it was filmed two years after the 2022 economic crisis that triggered mass public protests and forced a regime change.

2008

Jenifer McKim has started a new position as the investigative and podcast editor at the GBH News Center for Investigative Reporting in Boston. She most recently served as the newsroom's interim investigations editor.

2010

Monica Campbell has joined the California Local News Fellowship team at UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism as the cohort manager. She most recently was an audio editor working with the "Post Reports" team at The Washington Post.

Janet Heard has joined Code For Africa as editor of the investigative unit. Heard stepped down from her position as managing editor at South Africa's Daily Maverick last year.

Henry Chu, NF '15, Named Interim Nieman Curator

The veteran journalist and Harvard alum assumed the new post in July

Henry Chu has been named interim curator of the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University. Previously Nieman's deputy curator, Chu started his new role when Curator Ann Marie Lipinski stepped down on July 1 after 14 years as head of the foundation.

Chu has played a key role at Nieman since he joined the staff in July 2024, strengthening the foundation's publications, overseeing an extensive program of seminars and workshops, and helping to guide the 2025 Nieman Fellows and select the class of 2026.

A graduate of Harvard and a Nieman Fellow himself during the 2014-2015 academic year, Chu has strong ties to the university and the foundation that have bolstered Nieman's efforts to increase engagement on campus and with its alumni.

"It's a great privilege to be back at the Nieman Foundation and at Harvard, institutions that have both given me so much," Chu said. "Nieman's work in elevating the standards of journalism and fortifying journalists in an increasingly hostile world is more important than ever."

Chu began his journalism career at the Los Angeles Times after leaving Harvard in 1990 with a degree in history and literature. He covered a range of beats in Los Angeles, including transportation, education, and local politics.

Beginning in 1998, Chu took on a series of overseas postings for the Times,

Henry Chu

COURTESY OF HENRY CHU

reporting from more than 30 countries while serving as bureau chief in Beijing, Rio de Janeiro, New Delhi, and London. Before joining the Nieman Foundation last year, he served as the Times' deputy news editor in London.

Chu has won awards for his coverage of China and Europe's migrant crisis and was part of two L.A. Times teams that won Pulitzer Prizes for breaking news coverage.

In 2016, Chu left the Times for three years to serve as Variety magazine's London-based international editor. He directed the publication's coverage of the entertainment industry in Europe, Asia, and other parts of the world, including the impact of political and social issues such as Brexit and the #MeToo movement.

Harvard will launch a search for the next Nieman curator in the coming months. ■

Gary Knight, CEO of The VII Foundation, co-produced the "The Stringer," a documentary that presents evidence asserting that stringer Nguyen Thanh Nghe, rather than AP photographer Nick Ut, took the iconic Pulitzer Prize-winning photo known as "Napalm Girl" during the Vietnam War.

2012

Samiha Shafy, foreign editor at Die Zeit, and her colleagues won the Reporter:innen Forum's Best Investigation Award for their series on hunger in Gaza, which reported on the humanitarian catastrophe in the Gaza Strip.

2013

Ludovic Blecher recently founded the Paris-based consulting firm IDation after serving for almost a decade as head of Google's DNI Innovation Fund.

Blair Kamin has funded a grant to support a new Sunday biweekly architecture column in the Chicago Tribune by Edward Keegan. Kamin ended his 28-year career as the Tribune's Pulitzer Prize-winning architecture critic in 2021.

2015

Celeste LeCompte is the new chief operating officer at Your Local Epidemiologist, a website that uses data-driven insights to explain public health science and help readers make informed, evidence-based health decisions.

2016

Mariah Blake is author of the new book "They Poisoned the World: Life and Death in the Age of Forever Chemicals."

Stephen Maher is author of "The Prince: The Turbulent Reign of Justin Trudeau," which has been nominated for the Writers' Trust of Canada's Shaughnessy Cohen Prize for Political Writing.

Wendi C. Thomas, the founder of the nonprofit newsroom MLK50: Justice Through Journalism, was named a Distinguished Fellow by ProPublica and will work on investigative projects in partnership with the news organization for the next two years.

2017

Brady McCollough has joined The San Francisco Standard as the sports editor. He previously worked as a sports enterprise reporter for the Los Angeles Times.

2018

Emily Dreyfuss has started a new job as culture editor at The San Francisco Standard. She most recently worked as director of the Shorenstein Center's News Lab at Harvard Kennedy School.

Nneka Nwosu has been named vice president of marketing at ABC 7 Chicago, where she will oversee local programming, marketing, and design.

2020

András Pethő, co-founder and executive director of the Hungarian investigative reporting center Direkt36, and his colleague Szabolcs Panyi won the 2024 Transparency-Soma Prize, Hungary's annual prize for best investigative journalism.

Jasmine Brown, a senior producer at "ABC World News Tonight with David Muir," and her colleagues received a 2025 News and Documentary Emmy Award.

2021

Reuben Fischer-Baum is the senior data editor for the recently formed data services team at Yahoo News. He previously worked at The Washington Post as a senior graphics editor focused on interactives and tools.

2022

Pranav Dixit has joined Business Insider as a correspondent covering Meta. He is part of the news organization's Big Tech team, a group of reporters covering the world's largest tech companies.

Samantha Henry Named Editor of Nieman Reports

The longtime journalist and Nieman staff member takes on a new role

The Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard has named Samantha Henry editor of Nieman Reports.

Henry has served as interim editor since November 2024. She previously worked as Nieman's assistant director for programming and special projects, managing training and programming for the foundation's cohort of Nieman Fellows. She also helped plan campus partnerships, media initiatives, journalism conferences and large events, such as the centennial of the Pulitzer Prizes, and Nieman's annual Christopher J. Georges Conference on College Journalism.

In her role as editor, Henry is responsible for directing an international network of contributing writers, photographers, and designers who produce news features, Nieman alumni news, opinion pieces, photo essays, and interviews with leading journalists and media experts.

Samantha Henry

LISA ABITBOL

Announcing the news prior to her departure as Nieman's curator, Ann Marie Lipinski said: "Samantha brings a range of experience to the editorship of Nieman Reports, the foundation's oldest publication. Her years of work as a reporter and in program planning for our Nieman Fellows at Harvard equip her in special ways to lead a magazine positioned at the intersection of journalism and academia. We look forward to Samantha's fresh examination of our industry and craft."

Henry added: "I am honored to continue Nieman Reports' long tradition of standing for press freedom and shining light on the vitally important work of journalists around the world."

Henry joined the Nieman Foundation in 2015, following a journalism career at a variety of news outlets, including several newspapers in New York City and New Jersey, CNN, and The Associated Press, where she was among the first wave of staff members to be cross-trained in producing print, radio, and video stories. She also worked as a media officer at the United Nations, working for UN Television at the agency's New York City headquarters, and for UNICEF in both New York and Panama.

Henry is a graduate of Hunter College of The City University of New York and has a master's degree from Harvard Kennedy School. She was a 2015 Knight-Wallace journalism fellow at the University of Michigan. ■

NIEMAN NOTES

Introducing a New Nieman Podcast

Storyboard's new editor, Mark Armstrong, on expanding into audio

With the arrival of Nieman Storyboard's new editor, Mark Armstrong, along comes a new way to dive into the craft of journalism and storytelling: The Nieman Storyboard podcast.

The show, which launched in March, is hosted by Armstrong and features in-depth conversations with journalists, authors, producers, and filmmakers — across a variety of genres and mediums — on how they approach storytelling and do the work.

Early guests have included narrative journalists Erika Hayasaki and Kim Cross, who both talk about their process for researching, reporting, and writing longform features and book projects.

Other notable moments:

■ Pulitzer Prize-winning former Chicago Tribune columnist Mary Schmich (NF '96) talks about her journey from newspapers to podcasting with her new show "Division Street Revisited."

Mark Armstrong

■ Wired senior writer Makena Kelly discusses how she handles anonymous sources when covering Elon Musk and DOGE.

■ The Marshall Project editor Akiba Solomon shares insights about the language used to report on people who are incarcerated.

■ Franklin Leonard, founder of the acclaimed screenwriting community The Black List, talks about the enduring power of "based on a true story" in Hollywood.

"Podcasting is a great way to build community, connect, and go deeper in conversations," Armstrong said. "I think there's a lot of value in hearing from journalists in their own words and their own voices. The audio form gives an opportunity to both slow down and wrestle with nuance — which I think is much needed in the current digital media landscape."

Armstrong says there are many external forces that make it a challenging time to practice journalism. "With Storyboard we'd like to focus on the aspects that journalists can control in their daily work, and provide some inspiration along the way."

You can listen to the Nieman Storyboard podcast on Spotify, Apple, or wherever you get your podcasts. You can also read highlights from each episode by going to niemanstoryboard.org. ■

2023

Moises Saman, a photographer with Magnum Photos, was awarded the 2025 Pulitzer Prize for feature photography for a series in The New Yorker of images from Sednaya prison in Syria.

2024

James Barragán is the new anchor of "Capitol Tonight," a statewide politics show airing weeknights on Spectrum News in Texas. Barragán was previously a politics reporter at The Texas Tribune.

Ben Curtis is now deputy news director for Europe photography at The Associated Press, based in London. He most recently worked as an AP staff photographer covering the White House and U.S. presidential elections.

Jikyung Kim, a journalist for the Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation in South Korea, will chair the National Union of Media Workers' Gender Equality Committee for the next two years.

Rachel Pulfer, president of Journalists for Human Rights in Toronto, received the King Charles III Coronation Medal in recognition of her leadership in advancing media development worldwide.

Andrew Ryan and his Boston Globe colleagues won the Investigative Reporters & Editors' award for Longform Journalism in Audio for the podcast "Murder in Boston."

2025

Jesselyn Cook, has joined Noema Magazine as a senior editor. Author of "The Quiet Damage: QAnon and the Destruction of the American Family," Cook previously worked as an investigative reporter at NBC News and as a senior national reporter at HuffPost.

Nilesh Christopher, an India-based journalist covering the intersection of technology, business and society, received a Ramnath Goenka Excellence in Journalism Award in March. He was honored for stories on the impact of AI and other topics for the nonprofit technology publication Rest of World, where he covered South Asia.

David Herszenhorn has been named European affairs editor at The Washington Post, where he most recently served as the Russia, Ukraine, East Europe editor.

Robert Libetti, previously a Wall Street Journal executive producer overseeing video investigations and documentaries, and his team won an Emmy award in the Outstanding Research-News category for "The Hidden Autopilot Data That Reveals Why Teslas Crash."

Ben Reininga, a Nieman-Berkman Klein Fellow in Journalism Innovation, has joined Politico as vice president for audio and video. Reininga was previously global head of news at Snapchat. ■

TIM AGUERO

Renee Ferguson, NF '07, Longtime Investigative Journalist, Dies at 75

A barrier-breaking television reporter, she was a mentor to many

Renee Ferguson, the first Black woman to work as an investigative reporter on television in Chicago, died in hospice care on June 6, 2025, at the age of 75.

A Nieman Fellow in the class of 2007, Ferguson spent more than 25 years reporting for the Chicago television stations WMAQ-TV/NBC 5 and WBBM/CBS 2. She was also a longtime member of the Chicago chapter of the National Association of Black Journalists.

Her investigations served to shine a light on stories that might otherwise have gone unreported. In an interview conducted for the 75th anniversary of WMAQ in 2023, she spoke about her journalism career, calling the job a privilege that carried great responsibility.

"As a Black woman and the only Black woman doing investigative reporting — and the first in the city, pretty much in the nation — it had to be right. There could be no mistakes, there could be no errors."

She also discussed what drew her to the subjects she covered: "When you see something that's really wrong, when you see a wrong that has been done, you've got to say something, you've got to do something."

Born in Oklahoma in 1949, Ferguson graduated from high school in Oklahoma City before earning a bachelor's degree in journalism from Indiana University in 1971. As a student, she covered protests at Jackson State University and Kent State University and was an intern for The Washington Post.

After college, Ferguson worked briefly as a writer for The Indianapolis Star before taking a job as a news reporter at WLWI-TV in Indianapolis. She spent five years there before accepting a position in 1977 at Chicago's CBS affiliate WBBM, where she was a reporter and host of the station's public affairs talk show "Common Ground."

In 1983, Ferguson began work as an Atlanta-based network correspondent for CBS News. She returned to Chicago in 1987 to join NBC affiliate WMAQ-TV as an investigative reporter, covering stories involving civil rights, social justice, children's health, and consumer issues.

Renee Ferguson, pictured in 2014 in her Chicago home, broke barriers as the first Black woman to work as an investigative reporter on Chicago television.

QUDSIYA SIDDIQUI

One of those reports was Ferguson's investigation of strip searches of women of color conducted by U.S. Customs officials at O'Hare International Airport. After the story aired, Congressional hearings were held to review the discriminatory practice, the search procedures were rewritten, and Ferguson and her team won a Alfred I. duPont-Columbia University Award in 1999 for their work.

Ferguson's other honors include seven Chicago Emmy Awards, a Gracie Award, the Associated Press Award for Best Investigative Reporting, and many others. She also served on the board of Investigative Reporters and Editors from 2006 to 2008.

Ferguson was a 1993 William Benton Fellow at the University of Chicago and traveled to South Africa to learn more about the country. After her fellowship ended, she returned to the country to cover the 1994 South Africa elections for NBC 5.

Ferguson also filed numerous stories about Tyrone Hood, a young Chicago man wrongfully convicted of the 1993 killing of an Illinois Institute of Technology basketball player. Hood insisted that he was innocent, and Ferguson's reporting ultimately led to his exoneration when Gov. Pat Quinn commuted his prison sentence in 2015. Ferguson continued to advocate for Hood's release long after she left reporting.

After retiring from WMAQ in 2008, Ferguson served as a spokeswoman for former U.S. Sen. Carol Moseley-Braun during Moseley-Braun's unsuccessful campaign to become Chicago mayor in 2011, and as a press secretary for U.S. Rep. Bobby Rush.

In later years, she continued to write, edit, and do research and, as a book doctor, helped her clients with book proposals and submissions to editors.

One of Ferguson's investigative interns during her time at WMAQ was Harvard undergraduate Pete Buttigieg, who later served as U.S. Transportation Secretary and mayor of South Bend, Indiana. In a recent post on X, Buttigieg wrote: "I learned so much from Renee Ferguson. She made countless lives better through her brilliant investigative journalism, as well as her mentorship of young people looking to make a difference. ... her impact and example will live on across Chicagoland and far beyond."

Ferguson's husband Ken Smikle, died in 2018. She is survived by her son, Jason Smikle. ■

NIEMAN NOTES

Remembering Nieman Alum Geoffrey Nyarota, Titan of Zimbabwean Journalism

His fearless reporting inspired generations of journalists in Africa and beyond

BY OBEY MARTIN MANAYITI, NF '20

News of the death of Geoffrey Nyarota, a towering figure in Zimbabwean journalism, reverberated across the globe among the countless journalists, including myself, whom he inspired with his pioneering work exposing corruption in the face of government threats and harassment. All were saddened to learn that Nyarota, who founded one of Zimbabwe's largest independent daily newspapers and fought tirelessly for press freedom in our country, died on March 22, 2025, at age 74, from colon cancer. He leaves behind his wife and three children.

Born in Harare, Nyarota began his professional career as a teacher before turning to journalism and becoming one of the first Black trainees at The Rhodesia Herald in 1978. Five years later he became editor of The Chronicle, a government-controlled paper in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second-largest city.

At The Chronicle, Nyarota gained wide recognition in 1989 when he spearheaded a high-level investigation into how senior officials were fleecing the government through corrupt vehicle sales. The revelations, which came to be known as the Willowgate scandal, came as the country was gaining independence from Britain, with new leadership promising to rule with transparency and put the Black majority first.

The story rocked Zimbabwe to its core and contributed to a deep sense of disillusionment with the government. Following his exposé, several top government ministers resigned, and one committed suicide.

"From those early years he made a name for himself as a fearless journalist who didn't allow the restrictions of a one-party state during Robert Mugabe's days to curtail his appetite to shine light in the darkest of places," said Kholwani Nyathi, the editor-in-chief of Alpha Media Holdings (AMH), the biggest independent media company in Zimbabwe.

"Geoff loved the craft of journalism. He was tenacious and very passionate, but he was also a great storyteller," Nyathi said, adding that he "will be missed by many, not just in the journalism fraternity, but also by ordinary Zimbabweans who were touched by his work as a journalist and author."

That Nyarota's work was accomplished at a government-controlled outlet — of the type Zimbabweans refer to even now as practicing "lapdog journalism" — makes it even more impressive. It came at a cost, however: though he gained widespread recognition for the exposé, Nyarota was forced out of his job at The Chronicle. He worked as editor of the weekly Financial Gazette, but continued government pressure forced him to leave that job and the country, and he pursued teaching in South Africa and Mozambique.

Nyarota never gave up the fight, and he returned to Zimbabwe in 1999 to found The Daily News — among the nation's first independent dailies and one of the most fearless newspapers ever published in the country. The Daily News' relentless reporting to expose corruption and human rights abuses made it the most widely read paper in Zimbabwe, which in turn made the government increasingly desperate to silence it. The onslaught against the free press began anew, with a reign of terror not only waged against journalists and support staff, but even on the vendors who sold the paper on the streets.

> **"[He] will be missed by many, not just in the journalism fraternity, but also by ordinary Zimbabweans who were touched by his work as a journalist and author."**
>
> **Kholwani Nyathi**
> Editor-in-chief of Alpha Media

New repressive laws were enacted to criminalize the free press, and Nyarota and several of his colleagues endured various forms of harassment. The paper's printing press was bombed in 2000 and 2001. Again, Nyarota was forced out of both his job and his country by a government-led crackdown on independent media. After multiple arrests and death threats, he fled Zimbabwe with his family just ahead of a police raid on his home.

After a brief exile in South Africa, and with the help of the Committee to Protect Journalists, he found sanctuary at the Nieman Foundation, coming to Harvard in January 2003 and staying on to become a member of the 2004 Nieman fellowship class. After his Nieman fellowship, Nyarota remained at Harvard as a joint fellow with the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy and the Joan Shorenstein Center for Media, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard's Kennedy School.

Nyarota remained in the United States and edited an online paper, The Zimbabwe Times, which featured reports by journalists in Zimbabwe. He returned home in 2010, and in 2011, he set up Buffalo Communication PL, a new magazine publishing company. In 2013, he led a commission examining the state of the media in Zimbabwe.

In addition to numerous prestigious awards for his journalistic work, Nyarota was the author of three books including "Against the Grain, Memoirs of a Zimbabwean Newsman" (2006); "The Graceless Fall of Robert Mugabe: The End of a Dictator's Reign" (2018); and "The Honourable Minister: An Anatomy of Endemic Corruption" (2022).

In spite of ongoing hostility toward a free press, investigative journalism in Zimbabwe continues to thrive, with new generations of journalists inspired by Nyarota's courage and example.

Andrew Meldrum, a 2008 Nieman Fellow and former Africa news editor for The Associated Press, said journalism had suffered a great loss with Nyarota's passing.

ROB COOPER/AP

Geoffrey Nyarota, founder of The Daily News in Zimbabwe, in his Harare office in May 2000.

"Against daunting odds, Geoff bravely carved out a distinguished career from exposing corruption in Zimbabwe in 1988, to founding and leading The Daily News, and maintaining his fiercely independent voice in exile, and then back in Zimbabwe," said Meldrum, who worked in the country for 23 years. "The impressive array of awards he earned cannot make up for the hardships he and his family endured. Through it all, Geoff was a generous colleague and great friend. He leaves a legacy for all journalists — in Zimbabwe and around the world — to strive to live up to."

Nyarota's death comes at a time when attacks on the free press in Zimbabwe are continuing. The country ranked 116th (out of 180) on the Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index for 2024. The report adds that the media situation in the country started to improve slightly after the 2017 fall of Mugabe, but media persecution is on the rise again since the 2023 reelection of President Emmerson Mnangagwa.

The government still uses political pressure and lawfare to harass and intimidate journalists, while the poor state of the economy also makes it harder for some news outlets to dedicate resources to support the kind of investigative work that Nyarota was known for.

But many Zimbabwean journalists, such as Hopewell Chin'ono, NF '10, — who has also faced harassment and imprisonment for his reporting — continue the work. He credited Nyarota as a trailblazer for investigative journalism in the country.

"Geoffrey Nyarota was a pioneering editor who helped in setting a standard for investigative journalism in Zimbabwe at a time when it was an alien form of journalism in the mainstream media," Chin'ono said.

He added that Nyarota will be remembered fondly "for his great journalism, as well as for his larger-than-life way of living." adding that it is sad that Nyarota "died when there is another Zimbabwean journalist in jail [AMH's Blessed Mhlanga] without trial, for simply doing his work."

A new generation of Zimbabwean journalists credit Nyarota's courage for their own career paths. Fungai Tichawangana, NF '16, said he was only 11 years old in 1988 when the Willowgate scandal made the headlines, but it made a lasting impression on him.

"At the time, I had no idea who was behind the reporting, but that moment marked my first encounter with Geoffrey Nyarota's work. Later, as I learned more, I would come to deeply admire his courage," Tichawangana said. "He inspired many Zimbabwean journalists to lead with integrity and courage in the face of incredible intimidation."

Tichawangana, a digital media entrepreneur who pioneered digital arts and culture journalism in Zimbabwe in the early 2000s, said there are few journalists in Zimbabwe over the last 30 years who have not been touched by Nyarota's work or inspired by his tenacity and courage, adding, "His impact is woven into the fabric of our profession." ■

NIEMAN
NOTES

Meet the 2026 Nieman Fellows

The Nieman Foundation for Journalism has selected 22 accomplished journalists from around the world as members of the class of 2026. The new cohort, representing nine countries, includes reporters, editors, producers, podcasters, multimedia journalists, a news anchor, columnist, audience development manager, and data editor. The fellows work for legacy newsrooms, digital outlets, national television and radio stations, investigative collaboratives, and as independent journalists.

Yousur Al-Hlou, a visual journalist most recently with The New York Times, will study how international humanitarian law has failed to prevent armed conflict, and the challenges for accountability mechanisms in prosecuting war crimes despite visual evidence.

Cindy Carcamo, a writer most recently with the Los Angeles Times, will study how two centuries of immigration have shaped the American palate and the U.S. food industry.

Irene Caselli, an Italian journalist who leads the Early Childhood Journalism Initiative at the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma and created The First 1,000 Days newsletter, will examine media coverage of young children.

Ridwan Karim Dini-Osman, a Ghanaian journalist who works as a news anchor for the EIB Network in Accra and with the U.S. radio program "The World," will study how African newsrooms can improve coverage of marginalized groups despite legal and cultural barriers.

Daniel Drepper, head of investigative cooperation between the Süddeutsche Zeitung and the German public broadcasters NDR and WDR, will explore how journalism collaborations can address the climate crisis.

Kaila Dwinell, audience development manager for the NBC News Group in New York, will research alternative news distribution models and ways they can enhance trust in journalism.

James Edwards, a New York-based journalist and podcaster who has worked for HBO, Wondery, PBS, and other outlets, will study documentary theater and how the stage can be a medium for investigative journalism and storytelling.

Silvia Foster-Frau, a national investigative reporter for The Washington Post, will study global and historic immigration and what can be done to improve coverage of immigrant communities.

Marcela García, an opinion columnist and associate editor at The Boston Globe, will study the population of undocumented women through an interdisciplinary lens that includes the law and economics.

Jessica Glenza, a senior health reporter for The Guardian US in New York, will study the intersection of law, medicine, and politics in her examination of healthcare financing in the U.S.

Lisa Hagen, a national reporter for NPR based in Atlanta, will study the history of Christianity and its intersection with politics to better understand current-day populist movements.

Suha Halifa, senior editor of The Times of Israel Arabic in Jerusalem, will study the effect of Arabic and Hebrew terminology in news reporting on public opinion, researching how newsroom composition affects language trends and news coverage.

John Hammontree, executive producer of podcasting for the Alabama Media Group, will study the rise of sports media and influencers and their effect on young men and the spread of misinformation.

Simone Iglesias, an economy and government reporter for Bloomberg News in Brasília, will study the rise of China's influence in Brazil and South America and its impact on U.S. standing in the region.

Yao Hua Law, co-founder of Macaranga Media, Malaysia's only environmental news outlet, will study new financial models and community participation for reporting on the environment.

Shany Littman, a magazine writer for Israel's Haaretz newspaper, will investigate the creation and spread of fake atrocity stories during wartime, focusing on their origins and impact.

Andrea Marinelli, deputy foreign editor at Italy's Corriere della Sera newspaper, will explore how coverage of the U.S. and its foreign policy is changing alongside the shifts in American politics and society.

Shaun Raviv, an independent journalist based in Atlanta, will study the growing field of AI safety and whether advanced artificial intelligence can be safe for humanity.

Sotiris Sideris, data editor at the Center for Collaborative Investigative Journalism in the U.S. and Reporters United in Greece, will explore the use of generative AI to enhance accountability reporting and reinforce audience trust.

Daniel Strauss, most recently a national political reporter for CNN based in Washington, D.C., will study how the rising use of cryptocurrency will affect federal campaigns, elections, and policymaking.

Ling Wei, a freelance editor with Phoenix News in China, will study the intersection of xenophobia and the internet and how journalists can use storytelling to broaden perspectives and reduce division.

Wufei Yu, a Hong Kong-based journalist, will study the role of local and Indigenous communities in conservation and climate change policy, with a focus on China and the Chinese diaspora. ■


Yousur Al-Hlou


James Edwards


John Hammontree


Sotiris Sideris


Cindy Carcamo


Silvia Foster-Frau


Simone Iglesias


Daniel Strauss


Irene Caselli


Marcela García

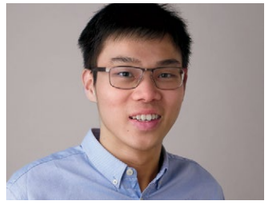

Yao Hua Law


Ling Wei


Ridwan Karim Dini-Osman


Jessica Glenza


Shany Littman


Wufei Yu


Daniel Drepper


Lisa Hagen


Andrea Marinelli


Kaila Dwinell


Suha Halifa


Shaun Raviv

"Nieman is proud to support these talented journalists, especially at a time when there is a growing need for fortifying the free press."

Nieman Curator
Ann Marie Lipinski

SOUNDING

The Antidote to Ignorance

Kyrylo Beskorovainyi, NF '25, on the search for his name's meaning, and his life's work

One letter of the alphabet can represent hundreds of years of the suppression of Ukrainian identity. I carry such a letter everywhere I go: the "s" in my last name, Beskorovainyi. In the Ukrainian language, the prefix "bes" doesn't exist; the correct Ukrainian spelling is with the letter "z." The prefix "bes," however, is common in Russian. So is my last name Russian or Ukrainian?

The surprising thing is, even though I had struggled for years with clerks, teachers, and officials always questioning if there was a mistake in the spelling of my last name, I had never once questioned it myself — until I was about to get married. My wife-to-be was eager for me to get to the bottom of this mystery, as she did not want to assume my last name as her own if it contained a mistake.

I went to the archives to find out, and after a meticulous search, I stumbled upon proof in the birth records of my great-grandfather. His name had been written with a "z."

My search for the origins of my last name led me to the discovery that "Russification" of Ukrainian last names had been a common practice, especially after World War II, when Ukrainians were registered in the Red Army. Sometimes, clerks at the registry would make the change on purpose; in other cases, the initiative came from the people themselves. Having a Russian-sounding last name during Soviet times could help you climb the ladder faster, or ensure you wouldn't be marginalized.

Up until that time I had been oblivious to the origin of my surname — or, to use a phrase coined by Robert Proctor, a historian of scientific controversies, I had been practicing "ignorance as a native state." Why?

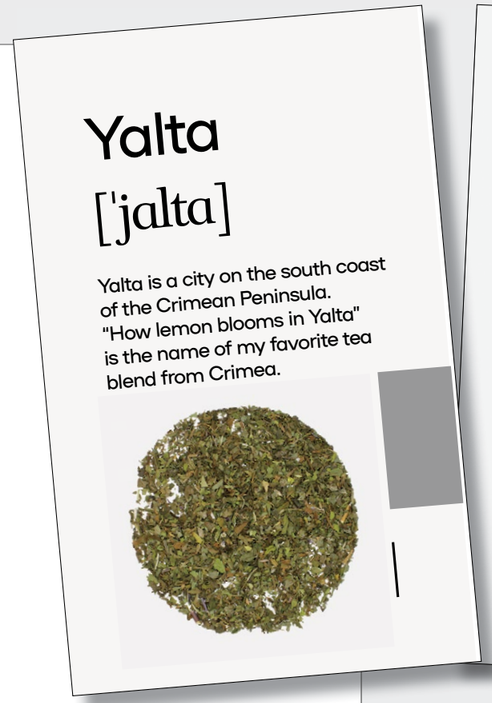
During my Nieman year at Harvard, I decided to explore the "why" further, taking a class called Agnotology (the study of ignorance) with Professor Naomi Oreskes. It was there that I learned how to put into words my developing thoughts about the ways ignorance is constructed and perpetuated. I also learned that ignorance isn't necessarily a natural state of being, but is oftentimes constructed through strategies such as deliberate or inadvertent neglect, secrecy or suppression, the destruction of documents, cultural and political selectivity, or trivialization.

Even "facts" in the form of records and documents — which we as journalists so heavily rely on — are, in the words of the anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "a narrative of power disguised as innocence." Which records get produced and preserved, and which do not? Who assembles them and how? What narratives are constructed around them? What significance is assigned to them retrospectively?

For many years, Ukraine's story was told for it — by others. The distinctive Ukrainian identity and culture were forcibly assimilated. Ukraine's intelligentsia was either assassinated or sent to labor camps. Unique letters were removed from the Ukrainian alphabet, and names were changed to be more Russian-sounding. It is no accident that before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022, Vladimir Putin published an essay titled "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," falsely arguing that the two countries were made up of one people. Prior to the physical destruction of Ukraine, Putin needed to destroy it in people's imaginations.

Although I found the prevalence of "ignorance as a native state" frustrating, I discovered that curiosity could be the antidote to it. My curiosity led me to science journalism.

My interest in the field came at a time of upheaval for both my country and the media industry. The only major science-related media outlet in Ukraine, National Geographic, left the country after the 2014 Russian occupation of Crimea — leaving a void for science journalism. We decided to step into that void, and in 2015, I co-founded a science journalism publication called Kunsht, an ancient Ukrainian word that means both "art" and "knowledge."



Over the decade that followed, I was immersed in stories: from chasing the head of the European Space Agency at the International Astronautical Congress, to hitchhiking around Ukrainian ecovillages, to organizing radio shows about the growing coronavirus threat. With a fantastic, passionate, and mission-driven team, what started with pure intuition and a desire to spark critical thinking in our readers has developed into a vital news outlet fostering an informed, science-based approach that helps people make sense of the world around them.

The impact of our work — and my deep-seated belief in the power of information — was solidified during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a radio show we created about the coronavirus that reached millions of people across 64 Ukrainian cities. We produced educational videos for train passengers, launched awareness campaigns with UNICEF, and produced podcasts on media literacy and the pitfalls of pseudoscience.

In May 2022, we gathered scientists for a Zoom roundtable aimed at understanding how our work as journalists could help scientists at risk in Ukraine. There were an overwhelming number of issues: museum collections had been looted by Russian occupiers, scientific facilities and equipment had been destroyed by missile strikes, and many scientists had been displaced. Out of this meeting, the Science at Risk initiative was born.

TOP: KYRYLO BESKOROVAINYI RIGHT: DANYLO PAVLOV

My journalistic work expanded to help seek solutions to the problems facing Ukraine's scientific community, and, with support from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, which was the first to believe in these efforts, I helped create initiatives to preserve scientists' stories and amplify their voices worldwide.

We have also collaborated with many international journalistic teams to make the stories of Ukrainian science during the war more visible — from the story of a bear evacuation in Vanity Fair magazine to opinion pieces on the destruction of scientific collections for Undark magazine. While at Harvard, I worked on making stories about oppressed Ukrainian scientists more visible to the American academic community through an exhibition at Harvard's Science Center. Spending this year in the U.S., during which the American scientific community has been experiencing such turbulence under the Trump administration, has made the story of science at risk in distant Ukraine feel very close to home.

ABOVE: Beskorovainyi created story cards for his Sounding about foods that have deep significance in his life.

LEFT: Beskorovainyi in August 2020, outside the Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute, one of the oldest universities in Ukraine.

A lot of our work has now shifted to focusing on science communication at risk. Whether curating and preserving scientific reporting, compiling databases, or overseeing research risk factors, I still seek ways to improve science reporting and counter disinformation during wars and crises.

Over the years, I've come to understand what truly drives me: the search for meaning — whether in my personal life, in the wider universe, or in science. I'm drawn to uncovering my own ignorance and helping others do the same. And I've learned that information is power: we can either use it intentionally, or have it used against us.

I'm dedicated to keep searching for questions I haven't yet thought to ask — like about the misspelling of my last name. This search is fueled by curiosity, but also by necessity. Because to win the war, we must first win the fight to speak the truth — and to speak for ourselves. ■

DATELINE:
HARVARD

Harvard Takes On Trump

The university is pushing back on attempts to bar international students and slash funding

BY WILLIAM MAO

When Harvard President Alan Garber took the stage at Commencement in May, thousands of faculty, students, and families rose to their feet, breaking into thunderous applause that seemed to catch him by surprise.

The minute-long standing ovation was a ringing endorsement of Harvard and its mild-mannered leader, who has been fighting the Trump administration since April to save the university's federal funding, its right to host international students, and its academic independence. Harvard's resistance has drawn praise from a wide range of supporters both on and off campus, including former President Barack Obama, a graduate of the law school.

"It gave me a lot of pride to be part of Harvard," said Caleb Thompson, the president of Harvard's undergraduate student body. "I don't know if we always live up to that kind of reputation and rarefied air, but this is a moment where I think we really did."

Such open defiance, however, remains an uncomfortable position at times for the university's leaders, who were deeply reluctant to fight President Trump in the first place.

Within days of Trump's inauguration in January, Garber hired a lobbying firm with strong ties to Trump insiders and opted to settle two antisemitism lawsuits in a deal that involved adopting Republicans' preferred definition of antisemitism.

The strategy seemed to work — at least in the beginning. The government's opening attack on higher education was a broad funding freeze affecting many universities, not just Harvard. And when the Trump administration began singling out schools, it was Columbia University that first came under the microscope.

The administration eventually turned its attention to Harvard, accusing it of failing to curb antisemitism and issuing a list of demands. Speculation that a settlement might be in the works provoked concern that Harvard would kowtow to Trump the way critics said Columbia had.

"I was afraid that Harvard would go the same direction early on in those months," said Archon Fung, a Harvard Kennedy School professor.

But then came an April 11 letter from the White House demanding that Harvard cede considerable control over its governance to the federal government, with annual audits of certain schools and oversight of admissions and hiring processes. Garber forcefully rejected the sweeping demands, calling them unconstitutional and sparking a historic clash between the Trump administration and the country's oldest university.

In the months since, the government has slashed nearly $3 billion in funds to the university, and Republican members of Congress have worked to impose a large hike in the endowment tax. The Trump administration has also tried various maneuvers to bar Harvard's 7,000 international students and scholars — including Nieman Fellows — from enrolling at the university or entering the U.S.

Harvard has fought back in court, suing the government over the funding cuts and the attempts to keep international students out. A federal judge has repeatedly blocked the moves to ban Harvard's international students, though the case is still working its way through the judicial process.

Despite Harvard's victories in court, some worry that the University can't withstand Trump's multi-pronged assault forever. The funding pressures have already had a serious impact on Harvard's research infrastructure — arguably the crown jewel of the institution — leaving it in what one researcher called a "survival state." A few international students and professors have been turned away at the airport by officials citing the Trump administration's entry ban. Many foreign students say their future in the U.S. is uncertain, and some have said they are considering transferring elsewhere.

BRIAN SNYDER/REUTERS

Students and supporters rally ahead of Harvard's 2025 graduation ceremonies to protest the Trump administration's attempts to bar international students from enrolling.

The pileup of threats has convinced the university's top brass that they need to reconsider a negotiated settlement. In June, Harvard representatives met with White House officials in Washington to showcase the steps the school has taken to curb antisemitism, and the administration listed more changes it would like to see. Some Harvard affiliates view the return to the bargaining table as an unfortunate but necessary step to ensure the university's survival.

Others remain concerned about a potential deal, skeptical that the Trump administration can be trusted to hold up its end of any agreement and hopeful that Harvard will continue its fight. At stake, they argue, is not just the future of Harvard but the future of American higher education — and democracy. ■

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