

NIEMAN REPORTS

Nieman

A NEW CHAPTER

**AFTER NEARLY 80 YEARS,
NIEMAN REPORTS TURNS
THE PAGE ON PRINT**

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‘How can we have the best of machines and the best of humans?’ Gina Chua on how AI is reshaping the news industry

Gina Chua, executive director of the Tow-Knight Center at the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at the City University of New York (CUNY) and executive editor-at-large at Semafor, has been at the forefront of digital innovation in newsrooms worldwide. Previously, she served as executive editor of Reuters, overseeing editorial operations and collaborating with technology teams to develop newsroom tools. Today, Chua focuses on helping journalists and news consumers navigate an information landscape being rapidly transformed by artificial intelligence.

In a recent discussion with the current class of Nieman Fellows, Chua spoke about the strengths and limitations of AI, the skills journalists need in this new environment, and how the media has repeatedly misread major technological shifts.

Edited excerpts:

On the Tow-Knight Center for Journalism Futures at CUNY's Newmark Graduate School of Journalism

The [founding] principle for this center is that AI will fundamentally change how people come to information, and we have to understand how that's happening. My line is: You go to war with the audience you have, not the audience you would like to have. There's no point lecturing people about how they should read news, or what news is good for them, or how they should trust us, or whatever, because they're going to do what they're going to do.

The goal of the center is to try and figure out what our role is if we believe in our mission of public interest information. We missed the internet revolution because we wanted it to be what we wanted it to be, not what it turned out to be. We missed the social media revolution because we wanted it to be what we wanted it to be, and it turned out to be something completely different. If we keep insisting AI has to be what we want it to be, we will lose. ... If we

don't look up and look at what the world is becoming, we are not going to be in a good place.

On AI's growing impact on journalism

The BBC and the European Broadcasting Union just came out with a report where they essentially said AI is really terrible, and there are lots of hallucinations. Forty-five percent of the stories have a problem. I have some problems with their methodology, but the core findings are not wrong. They say 7% of people use AI for news regularly. Fifteen percent of 18-to-25-year-olds use it regularly. I mean, that number is going to grow, as the quality of the information grows; we're going to live in that world. And there's no point saying: "Those guys are really stupid and maybe they should do something better," because they're not going to do something better.

It's not even AI's fault that we're losing traffic, and we're losing trust. AI is coming and changing it, and I firmly believe, one, that we have to adjust to the moment. And, two, [that] there are real opportunities, that we can do our mission better if we understand what AI does well, what it does badly, and how we can essentially use it to fulfill our mission.

When you have AI, you have a sudden drop in the cost of production, a sudden ability to create new sets of information. I think we're going to be shifting to very small, very tight communities of

“**If you don't know what your audience wants, then you're just a purveyor of straight-up facts. If you don't have a relationship with your customer, that's a real problem.**”

information where the value is less in the work you create, but in your understanding of [the audience's] needs.

On AI disrupting the journalism job market

I often get asked, "Well, what about our jobs and what about staying employed?" My answer has always been, "We are not in the business of keeping journalists employed." We're not even in the business of preserving journalism, per se. We're in the business of preserving public information.

So, if we can do it with no people, if we can do it with some people, we'll do it with as many people as we need to do it with, right? My analogy has been this: Let's assume that we were a group of doctors, and we're sitting around and somebody said, "Hey, I have this new tool that will really help public health outcomes overall, but 80% of us will be unemployed." And then the doctor says, "We can't let that happen. We need jobs." You know how we would report on that meeting, right? I mean, we'd be like, "Doctors don't [care] about public health, they just want to keep their jobs." The point is just to say: Asking questions, gathering facts, and community-building, that's where I think our value lies.

The question is: What do news organizations do in this universe? Can they just sell their information to AI systems? I think that's one possible thing. But facts are not copyrightable, the form of words is copyrightable. By the way, AI-generated text is not copyrightable. It's a really interesting legal question that we have not begun to grapple with at all, and that's the one thing that gets in the way of my whole AI-intermediated universe, very quickly.

If you become just a supplier of information, you go out of business pretty quickly. The value, as most tech companies have realized, is in that last-mile relationship with the user. That's why I keep thinking that news organizations have to bond with their audiences. If you don't know what your audience wants, then you're just a purveyor of straight-up facts. If you don't have a relationship with your customer, that's a real problem.

On the skills journalism must preserve in the age of AI

Think about what we do. What is the value chain of journalism? We ask questions — ideally good questions. You gather facts, you add analysis — sometimes by yourself, sometimes [with] machines, sometimes



Gina Chua in the Reuters New York City newsroom in 2021. Formerly executive editor of the news service and now head of the Tow-Knight Center at the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at CUNY, Chua says journalists must understand AI's limits and strengths — and double down on skills like fact-checking, interviewing, and building trust with audiences.

with experts. You add context, you create narrative. You distribute and you engage. We gave up distribution some time ago. We say we engage. We don't really try, but we should, and we put almost all our soul and our identity into the creation of narrative, because that's what we do. We're storytellers. Well, there's a machine that now does narrative better than most of us, right?

The question is: What are the core skills we truly need to have, and what are the skills that we can usefully outsource to machines? I can't walk 100 miles. I'm sure back in the day, people could, and they did, and now I don't have to. So what are the skills that are really, really critical, and which ones are not?

Journalism education does have a real role to play in giving people really core skills, [such as] finding verification, asking questions, and so on. I don't know what the answer to that is, partly because AI is changing. Every 20 days, something new comes up. No one has ever called me an optimist. But as I look at the editing tools that I'm building [using AI], ... if we can

build those tools, and if we can encourage people to use them, I really think that they can be interesting.

I built three editor avatars in Claude Artifacts [interactive AI-generated web content, tools, and code created within the Claude AI chat interface.] One is a grumpy copy editor. One is a structural editor that says, "Your thesis is fine ... but structurally and organizationally, your story could be better. You could tighten this part, get rid of that, and so on." The third one is a conceptual editor that says, "Are you really sure this is the story you want to do?"

“**Machines are good at some things, humans are good at some things. Let's put those two together, and maybe we will actually move forward as a species.**”

I think we have to accept that this is the world that we live in. ... You know, cars are terrible — they pollute and they kill too many people. And, you know what? They also move us around. And so I do think we can do both things simultaneously. I think we have to keep looking at the core infrastructure of the world, and this is going to be the core infrastructure of the world — I think we just have to kind of accept that.

Humans do a lot of great things. ... Humans also make a lot of really bad decisions. How can we not overemphasize, embellish, or deify humanity, and not just simply condemn machines because they're different? What can we do to build the two together? How can we build a cybernetic newsroom? How can we have the best of machines and the best of humans? Not make machines cheap and bad versions of humans, and not make humans bad versions of machines. Machines are good at some things, humans are good at some things. Let's put those two together, and maybe we will actually move forward as a species. ■

Journalism at an AI Inflection Point

As artificial intelligence moves into newsrooms, four Nieman Fellows weigh in on the technology's promise, limits, and risks.

As journalism grapples with another era-defining technological shift, few questions loom larger than how artificial intelligence will impact reporting, writing, and the relationships between journalists and their subjects. At a virtual Nieman-to-Nieman seminar in November, four Nieman Fellow alums — each working on a different aspect of AI through the lenses of journalism, technology, and education — discussed the hype, fear, and potential of artificial intelligence.

Moderated by Tyler Dukes (NF '17), lead editor for AI innovation in journalism at the McClatchy Media Co., the discussion brought together Uli Köppen (NF '19), chief AI officer at public broadcaster Bayerischer Rundfunk in Munich; Ron Stodghill (NF '01), professor at the Missouri School of Journalism; and Jaemark Tordecilla (NF '24), a Philippines-based journalist, media adviser, and technologist focused on AI and newsroom innovation. Edited excerpts:

Tyler Dukes: To kick us off, what is just one successful example — either personally or professionally — where you've used AI and have seen the benefits of that technology?

Jaemark Tordecilla: In Manila, there's been a lot of outrage over infrastructure projects that have been riddled with corruption. Recently, the president published a website listing all the flood-control projects in the Philippines. I took 20 minutes to vibe code [a process of using natural language prompts in AI] a script to download all the projects from that [website]. It was useful for a couple of media organizations and NGOs that were researching those projects. I also posted it on social media so anyone can take the spreadsheet that I made available, load it to ChatGPT, and ask questions about the particular projects in their areas. It became this whole crowdsourced thing and a nice win for AI-use importing.

Uli Köppen: I am responsible for one of the biggest broadcasters in Europe. We have more than 20,000 journalists in the whole organization, so we [created] an AI assistant to help people in the newsroom be more effective and use their [time on] work, and focus on reporting and analysis, not so much on the versioning of their stories.

We made a small chatbot to [explore] how we can combine our content with the content of other publishers, because we believe in the concept of a trusted content pool that we have as news publishers. We made a chatbot for the Oktoberfest, because we are Munich-based, and [the festival] is one of the biggest events here. As soon as we combined our content with the content of a private publisher, the answers improved.

Dukes: A lot of these technologies are in the hands of these big tech companies: Meta, Google, and now OpenAI. Do you think newsrooms are trying to maintain independence from these companies while we still use their tech?

Tordecilla: No, there's no conversation about that. OpenAI hasn't signed any licensing deals [with news outlets] outside the U.S. and Europe. So no newsroom from the Global South has a partnership to get compensation for their content. On the other hand, these tech companies are the only ones spending money to do training programs for small newsrooms in this region. We're talking about

“**Only use [AI] to support your mission. You have to understand your mission and then you can use technology to support it.**

Uli Köppen, chief AI officer at Bayerischer Rundfunk



From left: Jaemark Tordecilla, Tyler Dukes, Ron Stodghill, and Uli Köppen

newsrooms that are already struggling with political harassment, the death of advertising, and the lack of any viable subscription models. There's really no choice but to dance with the devil. It doesn't help that the commercial products are the easiest to deploy inside newsrooms. You'll need infrastructure that these newsrooms don't have to deploy open-source models effectively. It's the same type of movie we've seen from the social media era, happening again with AI.

Dukes: Ron, you're teaching new journalists and helping them refine their skills. I'm curious about how you, your students, and your colleagues at the university are thinking about AI.

Stodghill: With the students, I'm surprised. I'm doing more with this technology than they are, but guess what? We've shamed them. [Our] journalism program is old, it's got tradition, and it's purist. I do believe that they think the superior way to go about storytelling and reporting is all human. And I'm sitting here thinking, "Yeah, but you've got a deadline too." I think it will be a weakness in our curriculum if we don't lean in on it, to teach them how to use it ethically, responsibly — I think that's where we ought to be going.

Dukes: There is this temptation with students to use generative AI in particular. How are you convincing students not to use this technology for shortcuts?



Stodghill: I think that AI is a poor writer. There's a generic sheen that you see in that kind of writing that actually doesn't do the job. But to do journalism that connects and resonates ... [AI] hasn't gotten there yet. I think AI is going to allow us to further forget about [the craft], because if we suddenly become productive, we also become very average and unnotable.

Dukes: I am least interested in the use of generative AI to write things, because we know how to write, and that's what we spend a lot of time doing. Fundamentally, that's not a problem that I am looking to solve.

I'm thinking specifically about what happens when, say, 20,000 emails from the [American financier and convicted sex offender Jeffrey] Epstein investigation get dropped on reporters as they did [in November 2025]. How do you use these technologies to use their search capabilities to say, "Find me the things that are going to be relevant to our audiences. Point me to the source material, and then I can put my finger on that."

Tordecilla: I would push back about not using AI to write. In places where English is not the first language, they've been using it to write articles. The way I think about it is it's going to be like chocolate. Most of the chocolate we consume in the world is mass-produced. There's going to be chocolate that's artisanal, that's special, that people are willing to pay for. I suspect that's what's going to happen to writing as well.



For places where English is not the first language, I have been telling journalism professors here that we spend so much time trying to teach kids to write in English, perhaps we should be focusing on reporting and other skills, if writing can be commoditized with AI.

Dukes: When you're talking to reporters, editors, and media leaders, how do you help them cut through that hype to get at the core of how AI could be useful in practical terms?

Tordecilla: I think [the hype] goes away quite fast once they ... try to use it for actual work. ChatGPT does a bad job making references to the original text, for example. And so they're really disabused [of] the notion that this is going to replace their jobs. The problem is that a lot of people in the newsroom don't ever get around to actually trying it for themselves, especially news managers. When I said the audiences are ahead of newsrooms, reporters are also ahead of managers in terms of use of the technology.

Köppen: I would shy away from [creating] text or graphics that are too generic. If you're using our AI assistant, it's a tool. We're telling our reporters to use it as a tool to take repetitive work off your shoulders, but don't use it for large amounts of content.

We are shying away from using photorealistic AI images. If people can't distinguish between something that is generated and something that has really happened, that is no good for our news.



But the technology is becoming better and better. Of course, you still have a lot of issues around [AI] hallucinations if you're using it to [generate] text.

When we published our chatbot ... we had teams looking at the results, making the system prompt and feeding [better] content into the chatbot to be sure that we could somehow control the hallucinations happening. If you decide to fully automate a user-facing product, then you really have to have those guardrails up.

Dukes: Looking back on the last three years, what's the most important lesson that you have learned about how to ethically use these technologies?

Köppen: Only use this technology to support your mission. You have to understand your mission and then you can use technology to support it.

Tordecilla: Technology is not magic, despite the hype, despite the cool demos. Once you get around to using it for real-life work, we realize its limitations. Start with what problem you are trying to solve before using it as a solution.

Stodghill: Institutions that have traffic and information have always been suspect to certain groups of marginalized people. I think this is a moment where we need to be thoughtful. I don't think we should write off this technology. I think it could be a tool of progress and liberation. I think we should embrace it, but cautiously, and bring the right people around us to keep the humanity in our work. ■

Lights, Camera, Action: Niemans Making Films

In this installment of Niemans@Work, we highlight a sampling of recent documentaries featuring Nieman alumni who have directed, produced, starred in, or otherwise contributed to a wide range of productions.

For some, these projects mark a creative leap — print journalists exploring the documentary genre for the first time. Others are veteran documentarians, building on years of experience in telling ambitious stories. A few find themselves in front of the camera for the first time after long careers spent asking, rather than answering, questions. This is by no means a comprehensive list of all the Nieman alumni working in film, but a sampling of some recent work that highlights how Nieman alumni continue to innovate across different forms of journalistic storytelling.

“Devi” (2024)

The story of a woman whose rape by police officers during Nepal’s civil war had gone uninvestigated — along with more than 300 similar cases registered with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission — until she spoke out.

Subina Shrestha (NF ’17) first encountered Devi Khadka after hearing about her case while reporting on a story about Maoist women across Nepal. Shrestha worked to gain the women’s trust and persuaded her to share her personal diaries and speak out on the taboo subject of rape — calling into question the official narrative of those in power more than 20 years after the incident took place.

With limited resources and funding, Shrestha and her team were careful to protect the identities of the women featured in the film, and enlisted a trauma therapist to support Devi and the other survivors during the filming process. The documentary has had immediate real-world impact, leading to legal reforms and a dramatic increase in the number of women whose cases are recognized by



Devi Khadka, central subject of the documentary “Devi,” looks at a diary she kept during Nepal’s civil war 20 years ago, which served as a crucial source for the film.

the government: from around 300 cases before the start of filming to nearly 4,000 today. Much of that progress was made possible by Devi’s sustained lobbying, which helped pave the way for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to accept roughly 1,800 cases last spring and the remaining testimonies in August and September 2025.

Shrestha said she felt “a moral duty” as a Nepali woman to tell this story, and she hopes the film “allows viewers, at home and abroad, to see what silence conceals: the pain, resilience, and humanity of survivors. I hope ‘Devi’ inspires them to action.”

“Devi,” directed by Subina Shrestha, is available to stream on Vimeo.

“The Dynasty” (2025)

A film by Direkt36, a Hungarian investigative news platform, exposing the business dealings of Hungary’s Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his family since the 1990s.

As executive director and co-founder of Direkt36, András Pethő (NF ’20) decided with his team to begin producing feature-length documentaries to show their investigative work to new audiences. While searching for the subject of a new documentary, Pethő realized that the story of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s family business empire had never been told through film.

The story of “The Dynasty” — for which Pethő served as a writer and producer — spans decades. The business activities



Two Direkt36 journalists discuss an undercover reporting trip to an exclusive club for Hungary’s elite in “The Dynasty.” Such covert reporting was critical in making the film.

of Orbán and his relatives have played a major role throughout his political career, yet remain largely unknown to the public. Bringing this history to the screen required a level of complexity quite different from text-based investigations, Pethő said, but the potential impact is far greater. Since its release in February 2025, the documentary has been viewed nearly 4 million times on YouTube.

“A written article would have been much harder to show the luxurious world Orbán’s family members have built for themselves,” Pethő said. For the film, the team took a camera — sometimes going undercover — and visited the lavish locations to reveal the truth to viewers. Pethő hopes audiences understand that for Orbán and those close to him, “politics and business go hand in hand.”

“The Dynasty,” directed by Bálint Bíró and Máté Fuchs, is available to stream on Direkt36’s official YouTube channel.

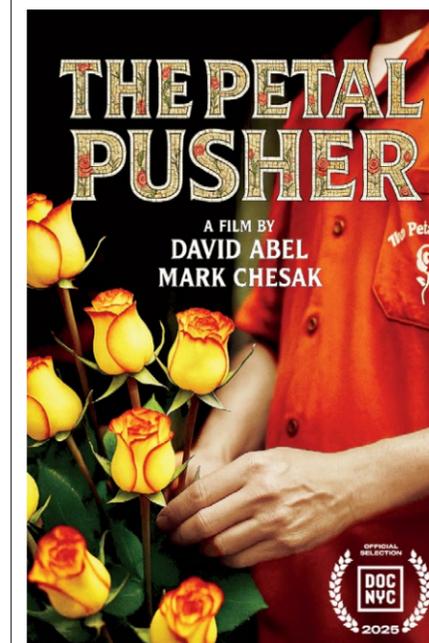
“The Petal Pusher” (2025)

Capturing the final chapter of his family’s flower shop in New York’s Penn Station, David Abel’s latest short film is “a testament to a bygone era.” It weaves together themes of familial love, loss, and the dramatic transformations the train station has undergone since the 1970s.

For his latest documentary, David Abel (NF ’13) turned the camera toward his personal history: his family’s flower shop, called the Petal Pusher, which was

one of the longest-running small businesses in New York City’s Penn Station. After his father died, Abel’s mother kept the shop going, but over time the station changed: Small shops were replaced by chain stores, rents soared, and extensive renovations changed the character of one of New York’s busiest transit hubs. Finally, nearly a decade ago, Abel’s mother decided to close the shop, prompting Abel to start filming.

“Penn Station was a place where anything could happen at any moment — a track fire or love at first sight; a holdup or a hefty tip; a terrorist attack

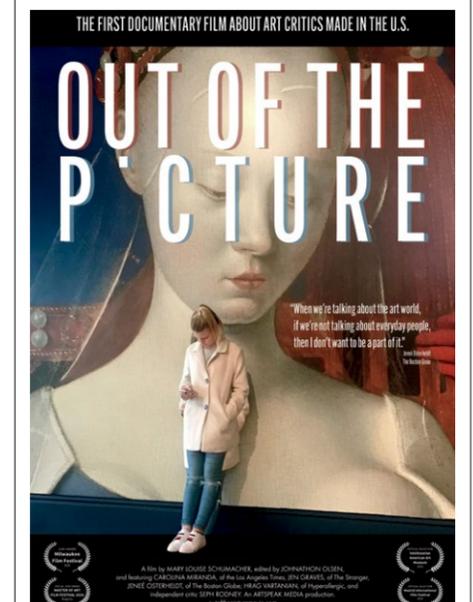


Director David Abel (NF ’13) documents the closing of his family-run flower shop.

or a random act of compassion,” Abel said. “The flower shop was where I also learned about the economics of love and desperation — how time and space could be warped when there was a train leaving and a spouse waiting, especially on Valentine’s Day, making even a single rose priceless.”

Returning to this underground world allowed him to hold fast to where he came from and to what shaped him. Penn Station “is in many ways the heart of New York, and a mooring to my family,” Abel said.

“The Petal Pusher,” by David Abel and Mark Chesak, is playing in select theaters. More information is available at: www.petalpusher-film.com



“Out of the Picture,” follows art and culture critics across the U.S. as they grapple with the uncertain future of arts journalism.

“Out of the Picture” (2024)

A group of art and culture critics from across the U.S. reckons with the future of their profession, the art world, and the media industry.

When art critics across the country began losing their jobs, Mary Louise Schumacher (NF ’17) had a gut feeling a major story was unfolding. She wondered what would be lost for communities and artists — and began talking with filmmaker friends about the possibility of a documentary. Eventually, Schumacher decided to assemble a crew herself and start filming.

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“Cultural writers are at the heart of our most essential conversations as a society, and the work they do is not easy,” Schumacher said. “This is not widely recognized, including among many editors and publishers, many of whom have outdated ideas about the role of arts writing. I wanted to make that case so the work can be prioritized, supported, and engaged.”

Coming from a print background, Schumacher said she found that documentary film “requires a level of trust that was unlike any of the journalism I had done before.” Building relationships with her subjects, Schumacher added, became one of the project’s biggest lessons.

More information about “Out of the Picture,” written and directed by Mary

Louise Schumacher, is available at: www.outofthepicturemovie.com

“Armed Only With a Camera: The Life and Death of Brent Renaud” (2025)

An intimate portrait of the life and career of Brent Renaud, a 2019 Nieman Fellow, and the first American journalist killed while covering the war in Ukraine.

“Armed Only With a Camera,” produced by Brent Renaud’s brother, Craig Renaud, Juan Arredondo (NF ’19), and others, began with Craig Renaud wanting to honor Brent’s life after he was killed by Russian soldiers while reporting in Ukraine in 2022. Arredondo, who was on assignment in Ukraine with Brent and was badly wounded in the same attack that

killed him, said the documentary quickly became both a professional undertaking and a deeply personal journey of remembrance and healing.

“The greatest challenge while making the film was revisiting Brent’s archives — thousands of hours of footage from Iraq, Somalia, and Ukraine — and searching for Brent’s voice and presence on camera,” Arredondo said. “Emotionally, it was a difficult process, but it reminded us how deeply [he] connected with people through empathy.”

The film, which is nominated for an Academy Award, also highlights the struggles journalists face in conflict zones and honors those who risk their lives to bring the truth to light. “I want audiences to feel a sense of urgency to protect press freedom abroad, [and] especially now in the U.S.” Arredondo said.

“Armed Only With a Camera: The Life and



“Armed Only With a Camera” traces the life of journalist Brent Renaud (NF ’19), who was killed by Russian forces while reporting on the devastation of Russia’s war in Ukraine in 2022. Renaud’s Nieman classmate, Juan Arredondo, is a co-producer.

Death of Brent Renaud,” directed by Craig Renaud and Brent Renaud, is available to stream on HBO Max.

“My Undesirable Friends: Part I – Last Air in Moscow” (2024)

This five-hour, multipart film chronicles the final days of independent journalism in Russia before its invasion of Ukraine led to a widespread media crackdown. The film follows a group of reporters — including three Nieman Fellows — who are forced to flee Moscow and go into exile.

When New York-based filmmaker Julia Loktev first listened to the podcast “Hello, You’re a Foreign Agent,” created by Russian journalists Olga Churakova (NF ’23) and Sonya Groysman (NF ’24), she immediately reached out to the duo. The podcast chronicled how they had been branded foreign agents and blacklisted by the Russian government, how they had struggled to explain the designation to their families, and how they kept reporting despite being shut out of newsroom jobs.

Loktev, who began filming in October 2021, ended up capturing what would be the final months during which independent journalism in Russia was still possible. As the project unfolded, she recorded several profound shifts for Russian journalism: from the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent collapse of independent media, to the forced exile of the journalists she had been following — including Churakova, Groysman, and Elena Kostyuchenko (NF ’25).

Groysman said watching the finished film brought her back to that time of grave uncertainty. “There was no instruction manual for what to do,” Groysman said, “except to keep doing your work under the circumstances, to keep practicing journalism during a crackdown on the press and the media.”

“My Undesirable Friends: Part I – Last Air in Moscow,” written and directed by Julia Loktev, will premiere on MUBI later this year. More information is available at <https://argotpictures.com/film/my-undesirable-friends-part-i-last-air-in-moscow>.



The documentary follows a group of reporters, including three Nieman Fellows, chronicling the final months of independent journalism in Russia before the country’s full-scale war in Ukraine.

“The Stringer: The Man Who Took the Photo” (2025)

The film questions the origin of the harrowing 1972 photograph “The Terror of War,” which depicts a 9-year-old girl named Phan Thi Kim Phuc screaming in agony as she runs naked alongside other children fleeing a napalm attack during the Vietnam War. The photo, often referred to as “Napalm Girl,” earned Associated Press staff photographer Nick Ut a Pulitzer Prize, but the film posits that the photo was instead likely taken by Vietnamese stringer Nguyễn Thành Nghệ.



“The Stringer” explores a disputed claim over the authorship of the “Napalm Girl” photograph, an image that shaped public memory of the Vietnam War.

For Gary Knight (NF ’10), a photojournalist and CEO of the VII Foundation, the story behind “The Stringer” began just before Christmas 2022, when Carl Robinson — a former photo editor in the AP’s Saigon bureau during the Vietnam War — contacted him with an extraordinary allegation: that the famous “Napalm Girl” photograph had not been taken by Nick Ut, but by a local Vietnamese stringer. The claim called into question for Knight the authorship of one of the most iconic images in photojournalism history, as well as wider issues around the treatment of stringers and the accuracy of historical records.

Knight, who was executive producer and writer for the documentary, worked with director Bao Nguyen and a team that included Fiona Turner, who is Knight’s wife, and Terri Lichstein (NF ’97) as producers. They drew on published interviews, essays, books, and archival materials from the war, as well as forensic analysis. But researching a more than 50-year-old story proved immensely challenging, Knight said, as many principal figures had died or had fading memories. Several veteran journalists declined to be interviewed, and the AP strongly rejected its former editor’s claim and refused to participate in the film, stating that, following its own yearlong investigation, it did not find “the definitive evidence required by AP’s standards” to change the credit on the photograph.

“The Stringer,” directed by Bao Nguyen, is available to stream on Netflix. ■

A NEW CHAPTER

Nieman Reports

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WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE NEWSPAPER READER

BY WILLIAM J. MILLER

Whenever two or more newspapermen get together the talk sooner or later turns to the sad state of the nation's press, and what should be done about it. That was true of every one of the nine groups of Nieman Fellows so far. A majority in nearly every group felt that the press generally was doing an inadequate, and too often a biased and venal, job. Like the weather, everybody talked about it endlessly but found no solution for it.

Many reasons have been advanced for the publishers' cursed persistence in continuing to publish newspapers that are far from being as honest, as fearless or as outspoken as most of their writers would wish them to be. One possible reason is perhaps too simple to have merited much discussion, and that is that the general public may not want a better press. I have come to the conclusion that the people get about as good a press as they deserve.

By the same logic, I persuaded myself that India did not deserve independence. "Look," I would say to friends who argued that India should be free day after tomorrow, "when we Americans wanted freedom, we damned well took it. It wasn't something we asked somebody to give to us. About the Indians: there are 400,000,000 of them, and only 40,000,000 Englishmen. We have just finished a war in which, for a good solid year, England was uncertain whether she could succeed in hanging on to her own little island. Let alone India. During that time, if there had been as many as 5,000,000 Indians who could have agreed on the kind of freedom they wanted, you couldn't persuade me they couldn't have taken it."

The trouble with the Indians was that they couldn't stop fighting among themselves long enough to unite against the English. The trouble with the American newspaper reader, however, is, I believe, that he does not like to read anything that forces him to think. That, and that alone

could account for the fact that all through the war the American newspaper with the largest circulation, the New York Daily News, was the one which consistently filled its columns with Nazi propaganda. The propaganda evidently did not have any effect, for the Daily News' readers went on about their business of winning a war, but the fact that they continued to read the News instead of dancing up and down and tearing it to pieces is an indication that they read it mostly because its contents were short, simple, and quickly and easily read with no cerebration whatever.

If you will make a careful study of newspaper readers on street cars, subways, busses, or elsewhere, you will quickly note that the moods which conflict with the always tepid desire to be informed are almost as varied as the scenery. At the time when most people read papers, either going to work or going home from it, they tend to be absorbed in day dreams, either planning the triumph they are going to put over, or else thinking up logical excuses for the rebuff they have just suffered.

In This Issue WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE NEWS- PAPER READER

by William J. Miller

THE SPRINGFIELD NEWSPAPER SITUATION

by Russell Sollins

CRUSADING IN A SMALL TOWN

by Ernest H. Linford

SURVIVAL OF A FREE PRESS

The Murray Report on Newsprint

I ALWAYS WANTED MY OWN NEWSPAPER

by William Townes

NOTES

THE HAWK AND THE PIGEON

A Story
by Ed Edstrom

William J. Miller, of the staff of Newsweek, was long a crack reporter, rewrite man, and finally a war correspondent for the Cleveland Press. He was a Nieman Fellow in 1940-41.

There are not many newspapers interesting enough to compete with a man's own mind, where the world's most fascinating character stages a continuous and unbelievably skilful performance for an audience of one. When the dream has fully away, the paper falls and the reader nods until a sudden stop jolts him back into the present.

As you watch the various newspaper readers, they sort themselves out into types. One man is torn between a desire to read and a desire to look at girls' legs. This forces him to keep jerking the paper sideways. Usually he settles on a particular girl and thereafter maneuvers his paper in such a way that he can pretend to read it and at the same time watch her.

Then there are the two readers who habitually ride together. As one talks, the other unfolds his paper and hastily scans the headlines. When he replies, the other takes a fugitive glance at his. When their discussion reaches an animated stage they roll up the papers and rap the seat with them for emphasis.

There is another type who goes through the whole paper as if he is looking for something he lost. He scans one column up and the next one down so rapidly he appears to be nodding his head. One seldom knows the object of his search, but it is a safe bet that he is looking for his own name.

I once shared an apartment in Cleveland with a photographer who, every night before retiring made it a ritual to go out and buy the bulldog edition of the Plain Dealer. When he returned, he laid the paper on a table and went to bed. This had become such a matter of his life that I doubt he could have slept if he had not done it.

It was also in Cleveland that I encountered the most discerning newspaper critic I have ever met. He was an elderly gentleman of moderate wealth. When his son told him I was with the Cleveland Press, he said he had always preferred the Plain Dealer. "When we are through with our paper," he said, "we use it to wrap the garbage in, and to spread on the kitchen linoleum when we mop. I don't know whether it is because you use a poorer

AFTER NEARLY 80 YEARS, NIEMAN REPORTS TURNS THE PAGE ON PRINT

BY MELISSA BAILEY

When the first issue of Nieman Reports rolled off the presses in 1947, it looked like a black-and-white bulletin, printed on heavy white butcher paper due to postwar shortages. The disruption rocking the news industry at the time was the advent of TV. "What's Wrong With the Newspaper Reader," blared the cover story in all caps — a polemic by William J. Miller (NF '41) about how the public "prefers to be entertained" rather than to think.

The first issue made waves, eliciting detailed coverage in the New York Herald Tribune, including an editorial disagreeing with Miller's piece. The magazine immediately drew about 300 subscribers, including a U.S. Supreme Court justice — and a slew of complaints about typos ("yargest," "freedomm," "payrool").

Nieman Reports quickly stepped up its proofreading and evolved with the times as journalists navigated a cascade of changes that came to include portable TV cameras, the internet, social media, 24/7 news, and artificial intelligence.

Now, nearly 80 years after its inception, Nieman Reports is making another change: ending its print magazine edition and continuing only online.

“It’s a time of tough choices for the media industry, and Nieman Reports is not immune,” Editor Samantha Henry said by email.

“Although shifting away from print marks the end of an important chapter,” Henry said, “the significant resources required to produce a print magazine can now be refocused on deepening engagement with our alumni, reaching new and broader audiences, and giving us more flexibility to be creative, nimble, and responsive to the news.”

This issue, the magazine’s final print edition, is mailed to about 1,100 readers, mostly Nieman Fellows. Nieman Reports will continue to publish stories focused on the news industry on its website, where it reaches a far broader audience — about 400,000 unique visitors per year. Nieman Reports already posts many more sto-

ries online than appear in print, and plans to further expand its online offerings, Henry said.

The magazine is also looking at reviving the Nieman Reports newsletter, engaging more directly with alumni, and experimenting with new storytelling formats across social media, where it has already moved into posting videos on several platforms, Henry said.

A BOLD BEGINNING

Nieman Reports, one of the nation’s oldest magazines about journalism, sprang up from a reunion of Nieman fellows in 1946, eight years after the fellowship began. The Society of Nieman Fellows — which was formed at the

FROM THE CURATOR’S OFFICE

A New Era for Nieman Reports

BY HENRY CHU

“Is the freedom of the press in danger? [The] answer is: Yes.”

So declared the blue-ribbon Hutchins Commission on the first page of its widely anticipated report on the state of the U.S. news industry. The 139-page document identified increasing concentration of media ownership and sensationalist practices as among the major threats to the survival of a truly free Fourth Estate.

That certainly sounds like a description of today’s grim outlook, with the appalling addition of a U.S. government bent on aggressively and systematically undermining the 1st Amendment. But the Hutchins report was published in 1947 — a reminder to us now, nearly 80 years later, that press freedom is not just something to be cherished but something that must constantly be defended.

Publication of the Hutchins report was previewed in the very first issue of Nieman Reports, in February 1947, with the findings analyzed at length in the second. In the many decades since, Nieman Reports has continued to cast a critical eye on the state of journalism — its successes, its challenges, its future.

And as the industry it covers has evolved, so has Nieman Reports: What began as a project by Nieman alumni to write “about

newspapering by newspapermen” is no longer limited to stories about newspapers or by men. Today’s media landscape would surely confound those “newspapermen” who contributed to the initial issues. In their era, they struggled to cope with the inroads of radio and television; what would they make of digital platforms, social media, and AI? Many of them probably also scorned the idea of reporting on women and “female”-oriented topics; how would they feel about reporting to women as their editors and publishers?

In our cover story, Melissa Bailey (NF ’15) chronicles how Nieman Reports has changed over the years in look and in content, eventually becoming a glossy quarterly full of stories that use both text and art to address urgent issues facing the news industry — stark economic realities, technological disruption, low-quality coverage of marginalized communities. The magazine has also enabled Nieman alumni to keep tabs on what other fellows are up to, through features like Nieman@Work and Live@Lippmann.

Now it’s time for Nieman Reports to turn another page in its storied history. This issue is its last as a print product; henceforth, the publication will be online-only at niemanreports.org, its digital home since 2014.

Spurring the change is the fact that Nieman Reports is subject to the same forces it strives to document. Some of that concerns finances and staffing: Putting out a print magazine is costly and time- and labor-intensive. From its inception, Nieman Reports has been funded almost entirely by the Nieman Foundation; it carries no advertising, is not sold on newsstands, goes out free to all alumni,

has few paid subscribers, and takes many, many hours for its small staff to produce.

But the switch also recognizes the reality that most of us read far more these days on high-resolution screens than on ink-filled pages. Already, many more articles appear on the Nieman Reports website than in the magazine. And under Editor Samantha Henry, Nieman Reports has been exploring new ways to tell stories about our industry, such as through video on platforms like Instagram. The digital age also offers new opportunities to connect and engage with Nieman alumni and readers in all corners of the globe.

Some will no doubt miss the physical magazine. But from the start, there was no prescription of form or format for Nieman Reports: In the inaugural issue, the editors wrote that it has “no pattern, formula or policy except to seek to serve the purpose of the Nieman Foundation ‘to promote standards of journalism.’”

That’s a mission that will not change. Nieman Reports will continue to shine a light on our industry and advocate for better, stronger journalism even when — especially when — freedom of the press is in danger, whether in 1947 or in 2026. In this issue alone we examine the “lawfare” that the Trump administration is engaging in to tear down U.S. news outlets, the innovations by media in Myanmar to survive deep funding cuts, and the strides made by radio stations run by women.

All these stories, and more, are already available on niemanreports.org. Please bookmark and check out the site regularly to stay abreast of what’s happening in journalism.

See you there. ■

event from the first 96 graduates of the fellowship program — published the first Nieman Reports issue the following February.

They called it “a quarterly about newspapering by newspapermen,” even though the fellowship had welcomed its first two women in 1945. It bore a simple design: three columns of text and no images. Subscribers received the first three issues for free; after that a subscription cost \$2 per year.

The first edition experimented with form and tone, including a whimsical short story by Ed Edstrom (NF ’45) about a heavy-drinking reporter whose city editor, a “fat-jowled, big-bellied, rump-sprung sadist,” assigns him a story on a pigeon-killing hawk.

On the more serious side, it included several reports from Sen. James E. Murray of Montana warning that corporate giants were squeezing out small newspapers, threatening the “survival of an American free press.”

In the first three issues, Nieman Reports devoted a whopping 55 pages, or about 16,000 words, to printing government reports about the state of the media, including the Hutchins Commission’s report on “A Free and Responsible Press,” which found that freedom of the press was in danger, in part because the media was failing to uphold a moral duty to serve the public’s needs.

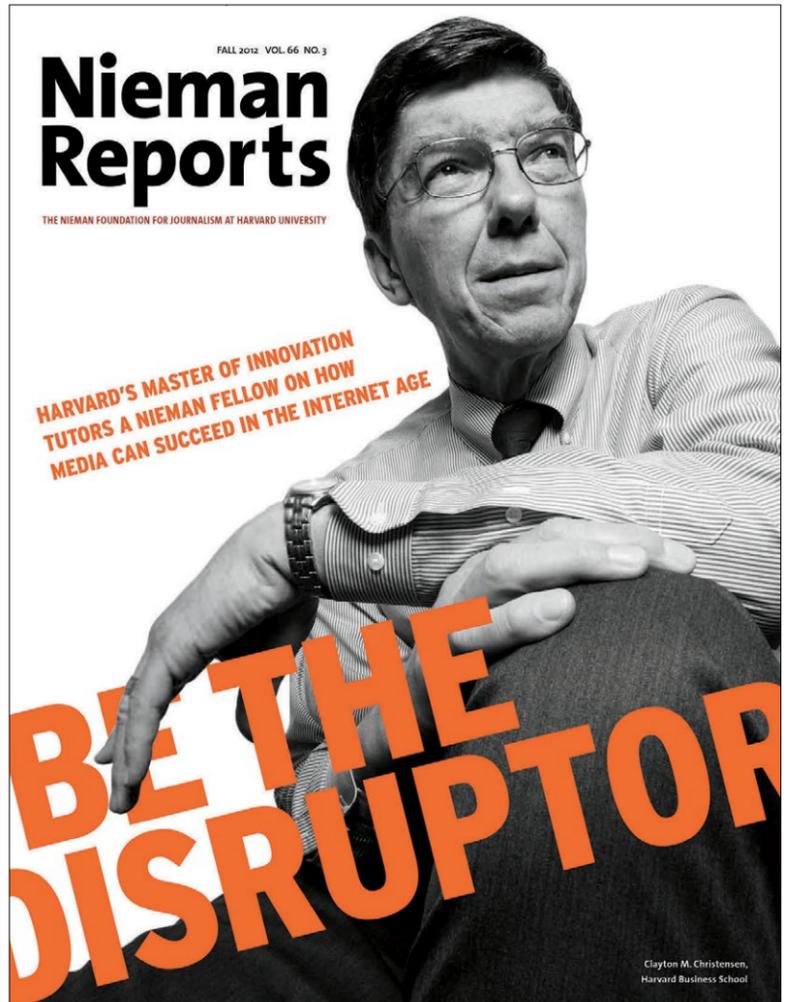
“Nowhere else was such comprehensive treatment given to these illuminating studies of the forces at work in the newspaper business,” reflected Nieman Foundation Curator Louis M. Lyons in an account of the time period, published in a book he edited “Reporting the News,” which was cited in an article in the magazine in 1978. Nieman Reports “filled a gap,” he wrote.

When the magazine started, it was U.S.-focused: Nieman Reports “has no pattern, formula or policy, except to seek to serve the purpose of the Nieman Foundation ‘to promote standards of journalism in America,’” a brief mission statement read. As the fellowship expanded to include international journalists, the scope of the magazine became more global.

From the outset, Nieman Reports relied on contributors’ pro bono work, so authors often wrote from their own experience instead of conducting extensive interviews.

Much of how the magazine looks today traces back to changes made by Ann Marie Lipinski (NF ’90). After Lipinski became curator of the Nieman Foundation in 2011, and, by extension, the magazine’s publisher, she pushed to start paying writers and to hire photographers and a designer to produce a more timely, visually compelling, in-depth report. The magazine broke away from a red-and-black Harvard aesthetic and began publishing dynamic cover images and color photographs.

James Geary (NF ’12), who edited Nieman Reports from 2013 to 2023, during Lipinski’s tenure as curator, said the redesign aimed to “make it feel more like a magazine in a journalistic sense, than something like a white paper” or an “academic treatment.”



The Fall 2012 cover, “Be the Disruptor,” signaled a new era for Nieman Reports. Featuring Harvard Business School professor Clayton M. Christensen and his theory of disruptive innovation, the issue urged news executives to rethink legacy business models — and marked a visual shift for the magazine, with bold, slanted text and a full-page portrait, breaking from its former “white paper” academic aesthetic.

TECHNOLOGICAL TUMULT

A stroll through the Nieman Reports archives finds stories about writers grappling with how to uphold journalistic standards in the face of the latest technological disruption of each decade. They meet these challenges with curiosity, worry, skepticism, joy — and an eagerness to share stories and reflections about their fast-changing field.

Lowell M. Limpus (NF ’41), a writer for the New York Daily News, “had never seen a television camera” when he was called in to a TV station to offer political commentary, he wrote in “The Newspaperman Meets Television” in 1949. Limpus was hired as a TV commentator at that year’s Republican National Convention — under the condition that he grow a Van Dyke-style beard, a mustache with a goatee. (He complied.)

For veteran newspaper writers, the role was “a performance, the like of which we had never anticipated in our cub days,” Limpus wrote. He outlined several problems print reporters could expect when asked to appear on TV.

“The moderator has to be continually on his toes, watching for libel and slander,” he wrote. “You must follow the discussion with hawk-like accuracy because

you have no chance to eliminate the libelous matter on a galley proof, if it once takes form.”

In 1966, Otis Chandler, publisher of the Los Angeles Times, pondered the relevance and future of print newspapers at a moment when satellites and portable cameras were revolutionizing TV news.

“A new communications satellite now in orbit over the Pacific will permit live television coverage of the war in Viet Nam by next year. The Viet Nam conflict is the first major conflict in the world to have been covered by television at all. Shortly, television will bring it into your living room as it is happening,” he wrote, with apparent awe and wonder, in a piece headlined “Why a Newspaper in an Electronic Era?”

Chandler offered an imaginative prediction: “Even further in the future, you may receive information from electronic impulses projected directly into the mind perhaps during sleep. How a book or a magazine or a newspaper will be ultimately transmitted to its user is one of the great question marks in the future of communications.”

However, Chandler said he was not “fatalistic about the future of the printed word,” because of the quality of its content. “Neither television, nor any other electronic device, in my opinion, will deprive good newspapers or good magazines ... of an expanding audience adequate in size to assure an important place in the American culture.”

The question Chandler posed — whether the latest technology spelled the death of print — would echo throughout the decades.

The dawn of the internet and the digital age has since posed the biggest challenge to Chandler’s optimism about the survival of print. In a 2006 issue titled “Goodbye Gutenberg,” writers explored how to adapt to changes that, one predicted, threatened to make print a “niche artifact.”

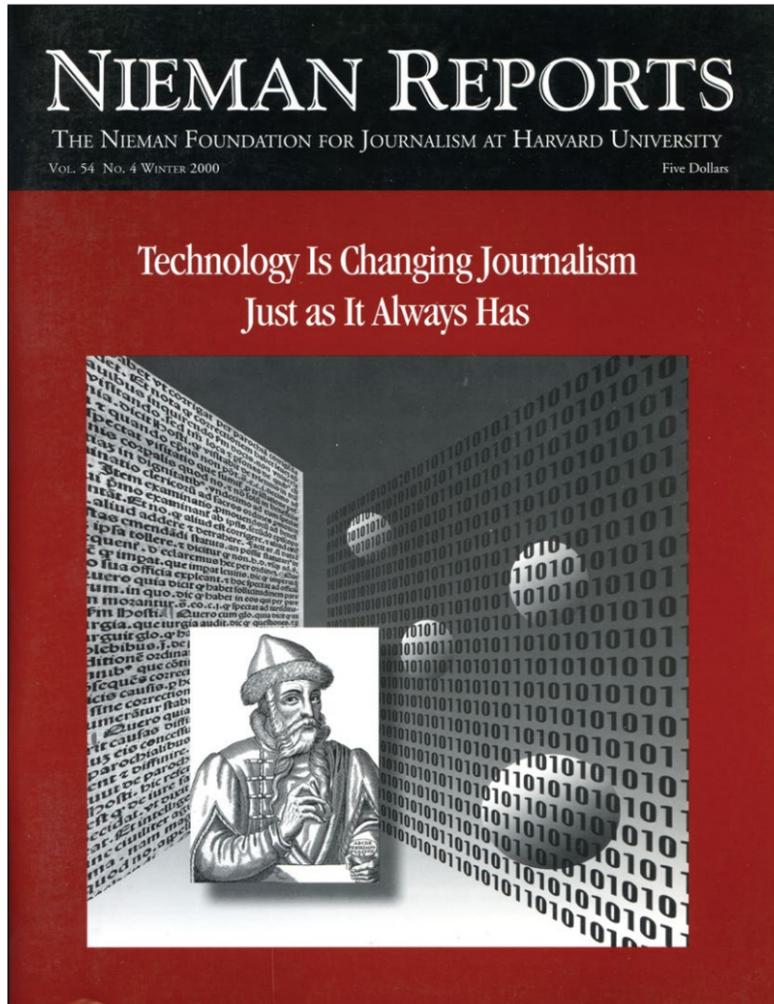
“Newspapers lacked the external vision necessary to see the vast range of opportunities created by the Internet,” bemoaned Chris Cobler (NF ’06).

Instead of investing in training staff on digital skills, “most large news media companies are slashing staff in a desperate bid to reduce expenses as profits plunge,” he wrote. “This death spiral makes me fear for the future of an industry I love.”

As a journalistic publication, Nieman Reports found itself having to adapt to the same industry upheaval it was covering. In the late 1990s, the magazine entered the online world, posting articles and PDFs of the magazine on the Nieman Foundation website, nieman.harvard.edu. The PDFs were black-and-white, except for a crimson red cover.

“The Journal for Serious Journalists,” read the tagline of the magazine on a 1998 version of the site, which featured a glaring white background with simple black text.

“The World Wide Web portion of the Internet may be the best place to begin for journalists writing on welfare reform,” wrote Barbara Burg in 1997, in one of the earliest articles posted online. To save her readers from sifting through an estimated 200,000 hits on the Alta Vista search engine on the topic, she offered a long list of hyperlinks to government websites.



The Winter 2000 cover argued that technological upheaval was not unprecedented but cyclical. Under Editor Melissa Ludtke, Nieman Reports began posting its articles online, using what were then labor-intensive, code-heavy processes. The issue marked the magazine’s first steps into the digital future it was simultaneously chronicling.

Melissa Ludtke (NF ’92), who edited Nieman Reports from 1998 to 2011, said that initially, posting articles online was an “almost torturous process,” involving writing code. An editorial assistant would “spend days taking the whole issue and making it into a digital product,” she said.

“We did make as early an attempt as we could to share what we had done in the magazine digitally,” Ludtke said.

In the early 2000s, articles were accessed in PDFs displayed online in yellow rectangles. Several website redesigns followed: 2008 brought clickable headlines under a thick, crimson-red banner; 2011 introduced color photographs at the top of stories.

In 2012, soon after becoming curator, Lipinski began to convert the print version of Nieman Reports from black-and-white to a color magazine, with much more dynamic graphic design.

“During the life of Nieman Reports, the way that publications used graphics, photography, art to communicate the importance of a story, the nuance of a story ... had dramatically changed,” but the magazine hadn’t kept up, Lipinski recalled. It was time to “elevate the power of the stories and to enhance the reading experience,” she said.

The 2012 issue “Be the Disruptor” marked “the start

of what we were going to reimagine for the magazine,” Lipinski said. The cover broke from the academic aesthetic with slanted orange text and a full-page portrait of Clayton M. Christensen, a professor at Harvard Business School.

The story emerged from an unexpected collaboration between Christensen and David Skok (NF ’12). Skok, a Canadian journalist, was curious about Christensen’s theory of disruptive innovation. He spent his Nieman Fellowship year collaborating with Christensen on how to apply that theory to help newsrooms survive plummeting ad revenue and other existential threats.

In a 15-page story in Nieman Reports, Skok and Christensen offered provocative advice, encouraging news leaders to “aggressively experiment with new distribution efforts” and arguing that it’s better to “cannibalize” your own business than to let a competitor do so.

After publication, Lipinski heard from “a ton of industry leaders” about how they were using the findings to inform their work, she said — including John Henry, who had just bought The Boston Globe and subsequently hired Skok.

The issue marked “a new age for Nieman Reports,” Lipinski said — one that aimed to take what Nieman Fellows were learning on campus and share it with a broader audience. Lipinski also began publishing excerpts of Soundings, a hallmark of the Nieman Fellowship, in which fellows share intimate stories about the influences and inspirations that animate their work.

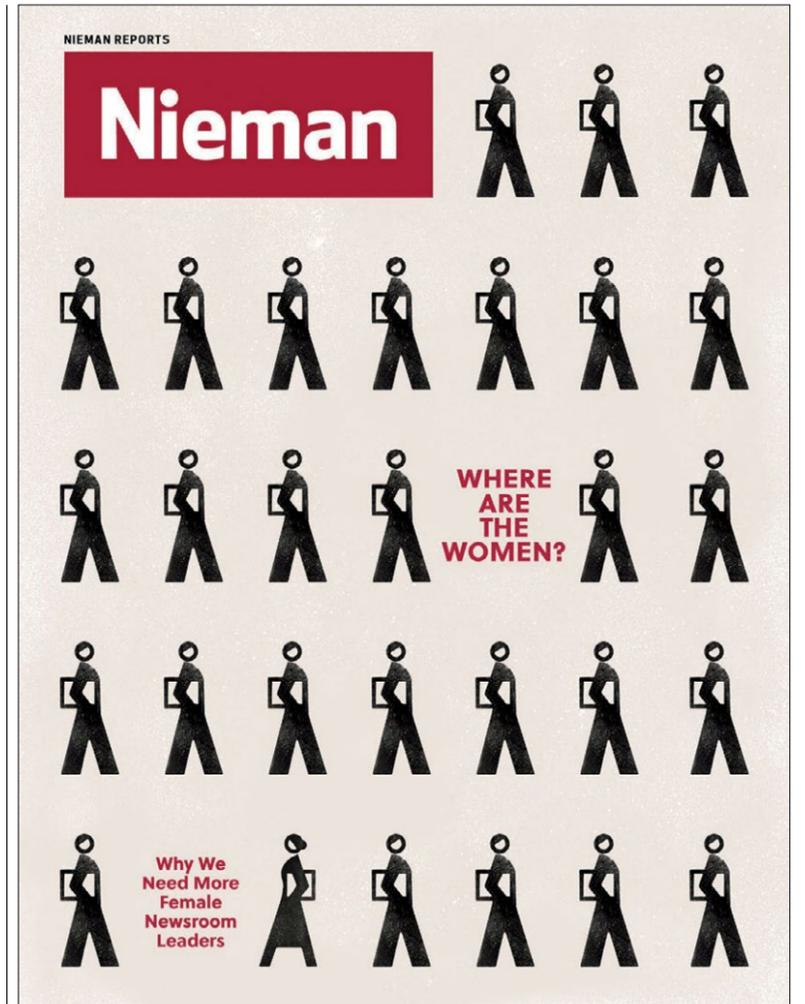
In addition to paying writers, Lipinski, Nieman’s first female curator, made the magazine more timely. In 2014, Lipinski oversaw the launch of a standalone website, niemanreports.org, featuring the magazine’s cover story, “Where Are the Women? Why we need more female newsroom leaders.” An illustration accompanying the story shows a lone woman walking against a tide of men in black suits.

Working with editors, Lipinski spearheaded packages such as “The Media Has a Sex Harassment Problem: #NowWhat” (2017) in response to the #MeToo movement, and “Dear America” (2024) featuring advice from international journalists on how to prepare for attacks on press freedom in the U.S. under the second Trump administration.

Long before artificial intelligence became commonplace in newsrooms, Nieman Reports came out ahead of the curve with coverage that framed the emerging technology as a powerful new part of the journalistic workflow. In a 2015 cover story “Automation in the Newsroom,” Celeste LeCompte (NF ’15) examined how journalists were using algorithms to dramatically boost the scale, efficiency, and customization of their reporting on finance, sports, and more.

“Automation is taking off,” LeCompte wrote, “in large part because of the growing volume of data available to newsrooms, including data about the areas they cover and the audiences they serve.” She highlighted promising examples — and examined algorithmic errors, transparency, and biases.

Serious examination of AI has continued, including during the tenure of Editor Laura Colarusso. She over-



The Summer 2014 cover asked: “Where Are the Women?” Despite earning the majority of communications degrees, women led only three of the nation’s top 25 newspapers at the time. The issue signaled Nieman Reports’ commitment to gender equity, a focus that continued with stories addressing sexual harassment and the #MeToo movement.

saw a 2023 cover story by Gabe Bullard (NF ’15), “Smart Ways Journalists Can Exploit Artificial Intelligence,” which showed how AI is “helping newsrooms connect with readers and reach new audiences.” The Nieman Foundation now has a policy limiting how generative AI can be used by Nieman Reports and its other publications.

Nieman Reports has addressed and embraced social media, from a 2013 cover story on how journalists used Twitter to report on the Boston Marathon bombings, to a 2025 cover story (“TikTok Boom!”) on what journalists can learn from news influencers. The magazine now publishes Instagram videos accompanying some of its articles, including one on devastating cuts to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting’s budget and another on what legacy media missed with Nepal’s Gen Z protests.

EVOLVING AWARENESS

As Nieman Reports adapted to changing technology, it also evolved dramatically in whose voices, perspectives, and ideas it gave space to. As technological advances promised to democratize the news, Nieman Reports contributors developed more precise jour-

nalistic tools to expose racial bias, and offered more robust solutions.

In Nieman Reports' early years, most of the writers were white men. Over the decades, as the fellowship became more diverse, so did the contributors. The magazine's coverage of the biases that infused how white-dominated media portrayed the world grew more nuanced.

A story by Gilbert W. Stewart Jr. (NF '47) highlights a limited understanding of race at the magazine's inception. Stewart called it an "experiment" in race relations when Fletcher P. Martin, city editor of the Louisville Defender, a Black-owned paper in Kentucky, joined his class as the first Black Nieman Fellow.

Stewart described progress in the white male fellows' awareness: "Not one of us will act, or speak, or frame an opinion on a racial question without first thinking how it will affect our friend, Fletcher Martin," he said.

The story and its headline, "He Erased the Color Line," reflected the era's assimilationist thinking and limited understanding of racial bias and equity.

Still, "the Nieman program under [Curator] Louis M. Lyons was eons ahead of the nation's press when it came to race relations," Simeon Booker recalled in Nieman Reports in 2013. When Booker became the second Black Nieman Fellow in 1950, "only a couple of dailies in the entire U.S. had ever hired Negro reporters," he wrote.

Martin, a World War II correspondent, was one of the first Black voices in the magazine. At his classmates' suggestion, he used the platform to speak out against segregation. In an article published in 1949, he described how two Black reporters at his paper were told to leave the main floor of a municipally owned auditorium and sit in a segregated balcony area while covering a rally by South Carolina Gov. Strom Thurmond. At the rally, leaflets circulated denouncing "communistic agitation for Negro-White mixing" with racist remarks about rape and robbery.

Americans overlook the fact that "segregation of any kind always means degradation and subjugation," Martin wrote, quoting the mayor of Louisville, Charles Farnsley.

As there were very few Black Nieman Fellows in the magazine's early years, Nieman Reports reached out beyond the fellowship to include Black voices, including Frank Stanley, publisher of the Louisville Defender. His 1947 article, "The Negro Press: A Challenge to Democracy," called on journalists to "strike at the very root" of prejudices by "pointing out concrete examples of successful Negro and white relationships."

"More important than anything else — openly and courageously expose all stumbling blocks to interracial progress," urged Stanley, president of the Negro Newspaper Publishers' Association.

For Jet magazine, Booker covered the trial of two white men accused of killing Emmett Till, the Black 14-year-old whose brutal murder in Mississippi would shape the civil rights movement.

In one of the most fascinating early reports on racial issues in Nieman Reports, Booker described how Clark Porteous, a white Nieman Fellow in Martin's Class of 1947, defied segregation orders and collaborated with Black reporters, not just on coverage of the trial, but



The Summer 2020 cover was published amid the COVID-19 pandemic and nationwide Black Lives Matter protests. Under Curator Ann Marie Lipinski and various editors, Nieman Reports expanded diversity among its contributing writers, photographers, and designers — reflecting a broader shift toward intersectional coverage.

also on the frantic manhunt to find witnesses for the prosecution.

"Although the trial still ended in acquittal, the murder and everything about it had a galvanizing and enduring impact on the civil rights movement, which in turn changed everything about life in America, including its journalism," Booker later wrote.

Nieman Reports also highlighted reporting methods that aimed to address white reporters' gaps in awareness about the nonwhite communities they covered.

In 1968, Philip Meyer (NF '67) raised the concept of "unconscious racism" and introduced a new journalistic response. Most white Americans "don't feel like racists," he wrote in "A Newspaper's Role Between the Riots."

"Most of us believe in the basic brotherhood of man, and therefore we can't be racists. Can we?"

"We can," Meyer concluded. Meyer helped the Detroit Free Press staff cover their city's five-day riot in 1967. In a newsroom conversation after the riot, "still nobody knew who the rioters were and why they had rioted," he wrote. Meyer led a systematic survey of Black Detroit residents to determine the riot's underlying causes — a move that would lead him to invent precision journalism, a precursor to today's data journalism.

"A good newspaper does not turn its back on a problem," he wrote. "The more the race problem is discussed,

analyzed, dissected and turned upside down to find what's there, the sooner there will be workable solutions."

Representation of women and other minorities lagged significantly behind the magazine's reporting on Black-white relations. For instance, the first cover story on women's issues came in 1979. The first focused on the Latino experience in the U.S. came in 2001.

In Nieman Reports' early years, foreign coverage was told predominantly through the lens of American men who had traveled abroad. For example, in 1959, "Report on Africa" came from a U.S. journalist who had spent a year there. The Nieman Foundation began accepting international fellows in 1951 — from New Zealand, Australia, and Canada — but it took longer to establish a truly global reach. The foundation accepted its first Latin American journalists in the class of 1981.

Nieman Reports now benefits from the perspectives of a broad network of international fellows. Instead of relying on U.S. correspondents to cover Africa, for instance, the magazine includes voices of people such as Hannane Ferdjani (NF '20), who led a project providing better narratives about Africa, by Africans.

In recent years, Nieman Reports has produced dozens of stories about diversity in journalism, including workforce development and the impact of new roles such as audience engagement editors. Coverage of race has become more intersectional.

Under Lipinski, Geary, and Senior Editor Jan Gardner, Nieman Reports increased diversity and gender balance in the roster of contributing writers, photographers, and designers. They published packages such as "A New Focus: Why We Need More Visual Journalists and Editors of Color" (2017) and "Meet the New Black Press," part of a 2020 package called "Racial Reckoning."

Coverage of unconscious bias became much more nuanced, too.

"No one in the United States is immune to the influence of white supremacy, not even a black Southerner like me," wrote Issac J. Bailey (NF '14) in a deeply personal essay in the magazine in 2020.

GOODBYE TO PRINT

Bailey, a communications professor at Davidson College, wrote a column about journalism ethics in Nieman Reports from 2015 to 2023, winning numerous awards. Bailey said he was disappointed to hear the print edition was going away.

"I will probably never fully adjust to not being able to hold a product like Nieman Reports in my hand," he said via email.

"I understand that with the development of new technologies, these types of changes were inevitable," he wrote. "I even have to adjust to them in my teaching. But that doesn't make it any less sad."

Bailey said he would continue to assign his students Nieman Reports' digital articles on issues such as race and trauma-informed reporting.

Ludtke, the former Nieman Reports editor, said she

NIEMAN REPORTS

Nieman

Kedves Amerika
Priy Amerika
Kochana Ameryko
Sevgili Amerika
Querida América
Minahal na Amerika
Dear America

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

The Spring-Summer 2025 cover, "TikTok Boom!," explored what legacy newsrooms can learn from digital creators and news influencers. The issue was the latest installment in Nieman Reports' decades-long examination of technological innovation — from live television to artificial intelligence.

saw the magazine as a way to stay connected to the global Nieman community. She said she appreciated that "the cover didn't have to be something that would sell." Nieman Reports has never taken advertisements, and is not available on newsstands. "I felt, and I still feel, that having that magazine plunked down in your mailbox four times a year was really a touchstone for you...back to your Nieman year," she added.

Geary said the move online "makes strategic sense."

"The print magazine is a treasure for Nieman alums and for people on the Harvard campus," Geary said, "but the audience opportunity is online. That's true of all of journalism and it's certainly true of Nieman Reports. So I think it makes a lot of sense to forgo the print edition and to devote those resources to doing more stories and reaching a wider audience online, because that's where Nieman and Nieman Reports can have its greatest impact."

Whether it's published on butcher paper, magazine stock, or Instagram, Nieman Reports retains the same standards of journalism, editor Henry said — and a commitment to serve both as a hub for Nieman alumni and as a public commons for discussing the most important innovations, societal pressures, and ethical questions shaping the future of the news. ■

Research contributed by Megan Cattel



U.S. MEDIA IN THE CROSSHAIRS

The Trump administration is deploying a range of legal weapons to attack U.S. news outlets

BY JARED SCHROEDER



W

hen a reporter asked Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman about journalist Jamal Khashoggi’s 2018 murder, President Donald Trump used the opportunity to launch another broadside against the U.S. news media.

Sitting beside Salman in the White House during the prince’s November visit, Trump defended his guest — whom the CIA has concluded approved the Washington Post columnist’s assassination — and disparaged Khashoggi, saying, “A lot of people didn’t like that gentleman that you’re talking about, whether you like him or didn’t like him, things happen.”

Later in the news conference, Trump returned his attention to Mary Bruce, the ABC News reporter who had asked the question, calling her “a terrible reporter.”

PREVIOUS PAGE: President Donald Trump speaks to reporters aboard Air Force One in September 2018. Media experts say Trump has made hostility toward the news media a defining feature of his presidency, increasingly backing up rhetoric with government action.

ABOVE: President Donald Trump points to a reporter during an Oval Office meeting with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in November 2025. After being asked about the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, Trump criticized the reporter and suggested ABC News should lose its broadcast license.

PREVIOUS PAGE: DOUG MILLS/THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX TOP: EVAN VUCCI/JAP



Insulting journalists, both alive and dead, is nothing new for Trump — animosity toward the mainstream media has been central to his persona since he first ran for president — but what’s changed in his second term is how those threats have been followed by action.

In his exchange with Bruce, he added that ABC’s network broadcast license should be taken away on the basis of her questioning, “because your news is so fake and it’s so wrong.”

The exchange, particularly the president’s dismissive conclusion that “things happen” when referring to a journalist’s murder, garnered substantial attention, but it was not an isolated incident. Trump spent the first year of his second term showing no hesitancy to leverage the full weight of the government, as well as the legal system, to punish media organizations he feels are biased against him.

“I don’t think it is an exaggeration to say that what we’re seeing from the Trump administration is an unprecedented level of hostility towards the press,” media law scholar and attorney Amy Kristin Sanders said.

The attacks have been widespread and, often, nuanced in approach, as government actors have leveraged financial threats, weaponized the legal system, and limited access to news organizations. Each of these efforts

has found success as news organizations, or in many cases the corporations that own them, have buckled under government pressure.

“We’re enduring a multifront assault unlike anything experienced in the modern history of American journalism, with the exception of the Black press in the segregated South,” said Bruce Shapiro, executive director of the Global Center for Journalism and Trauma. “You have to go back there to find the combination of legal threats, stigmatization, and violence.”

Meanwhile, a public whose news consumption habits are increasingly fragmented has looked on with apparent disinterest as, in Shapiro’s words, “the idea of the trusted vehicle for shared understandings of community events, of tragedies, of politics, of wars is being systematically undermined.”

SHIFTING NORMS

Ronell Andersen Jones, a First Amendment scholar who specializes in media legal issues, emphasized that the setbacks for press rights over the past year have come as many of the conditions that guided the relationship between journalists and the government have shifted.

ABC News reporter Mary Bruce asks a question during Trump’s Oval Office meeting with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Trump later criticized Bruce, calling her “a terrible reporter.”

EVAN VUCCI/JAP



Federal Communications Commission Chairman Brendan Carr speaks at a conference in 2025. In September, Carr urged TV broadcast license holders to pressure Walt Disney Co., which owns ABC, to stop airing “Jimmy Kimmel Live!” over comments Kimmel made during a monologue.

“A lot of what has happened in the press freedom space over the arc of the entirety of the modern media era has been norm-based and not rule-based,” Jones said. “It’s a soft law and agreements, and a sort of careful dance between the press and the government, and an appreciation on both sides that the other has an important role in democracy.”

The fragility of that agreement was highlighted when, a few weeks before Trump’s comments on Khashoggi, dozens of reporters covering the Pentagon for major media outlets turned in their press credentials after refusing to sign an agreement promising they wouldn’t gather or report information that wasn’t authorized by the Pentagon. Some of their places were soon filled by outlets with clear right-wing biases. The New York Times filed a lawsuit in December contending the new rules violated the First Amendment.

The norm-breaking also was apparent last spring, when the White House revoked the Associated Press’ press pool credentials because the organization declined to refer to the Gulf of Mexico as the Gulf of America in its reporting. The organization has sued for its access to be restored.

“We assumed that the Associated Press would always have a place in White House briefings, in the Oval Office,

and that’s simply not an assumption we can make anymore,” said Sanders.

Shapiro identified similar concerns but framed them differently. Remembering when Univision journalist Jorge Ramos was removed from a Trump press conference in August 2015 after he repeatedly pressed the then-candidate about his immigration policy, Shapiro said losing access to spaces, threats toward journalists, and other attacks on the press take a toll on journalists and democracy.

“It was a physical ejection of a journalist, which kind of got the ball rolling, which showed that the spectacle of physical violence could work,” he said, emphasizing that physical altercations with journalists have escalated recently, during Immigration and Customs Enforcement operations in Chicago and Los Angeles.

THREATS TO BROADCASTERS

The saga of late-night talk show host Jimmy Kimmel shone a spotlight on an increasingly popular practice — leveraging or threatening a corporation’s financial interests to exert pressures on unpopular ideas and information shared through its media properties.

About a week after the death of right-wing activist

ANDRES KUDACKI/AP



DAMIAN DOVARGANES/AP

Protesters gather outside the El Capitan Entertainment Centre in Los Angeles, where “Jimmy Kimmel Live!” is staged in September 2025, after broadcast companies briefly pulled the show off the air.

Charlie Kirk in September, Federal Communications Commission Chair Brendan Carr told a conservative podcaster that comments Kimmel made about Kirk and Trump’s followers were “truly sick.”

Kimmel had quipped during his monologue, “We hit some new lows over the weekend with the MAGA gang desperately trying to characterize this kid who murdered Charlie Kirk as anything other than one of them.”

Carr went beyond criticizing Kimmel’s comments; he threatened government action, telling the podcaster, “We can do this the easy way or the hard way. These companies can find ways to change conduct and take action, frankly, on Kimmel, or there is going to be additional work for the FCC ahead.”

He continued by encouraging corporations that hold broadcast licenses to pressure Walt Disney Co. not to air Kimmel’s show.

While the statement included warnings regarding potentially unpopular, but generally First Amendment-protected expression, they seemed aimed less at Kimmel than at broadcast license holders and Disney, which owns ABC, the network that airs Kimmel’s show.

Carr’s message was directed at companies like Nexstar Media Group, Tegna Inc., and Sinclair Broadcast Group, which are among the largest owners of broadcast television licenses in the U.S., said Chris Terry, a media

Government officials and others with financial means can file lawsuits that, even if they have little chance

of legal victory, drain news organizations’ resources, increase stress and trauma for journalists, and chill factual reporting.

law scholar whose research focuses on broadcast policy and media ownership. Terry noted that Carr and the FCC have little power to force networks to censor programming in any way.

What they can affect are mergers that require FCC approval. At the time of the Kimmel controversy, Nexstar was seeking to acquire Tegna, and Sinclair was pushing the FCC to loosen the rules that limit the numbers of stations companies can own in a single market.

“If Carr has any power here, it’s to hold up these mergers,” Terry said. “Carr can stick his finger right on the scale of those and just slow that process down.”

Nexstar, which operates roughly 30 ABC affiliates, announced it would pull Kimmel’s show the same day that Carr made his comments, and Sinclair followed

suit with its more than three dozen stations. ABC suspended Kimmel's show across its entire network just hours later, though it was reinstated within a week. Importantly, the network did not suspend the show because the government directly threatened to fine or censor content, which would face substantial First Amendment hurdles.

A similar tactic worked with Trump's lawsuit against CBS News, which its parent company, Paramount, settled for \$16 million in July. The president sued CBS News for \$20 billion for the way the news program "60 Minutes" edited an interview with Democratic presidential candidate Kamala Harris before the 2024 election. The lawsuit put Paramount in a difficult position because it was awaiting FCC approval for its \$8 billion merger with Skydance Media.

Legal experts found the case had no merit. Nevertheless, Paramount settled. The FCC approved a merger between Paramount and Skydance a few weeks later.

Sanders, the media law expert, pointed out that news operations like CBS' have become small parts of massive corporations, which allows government actors to jeopardize financial concerns in other areas of the firm's holdings to get desired results in the news divisions.

"The regulatory reach covers these mega-media corporations in ways that it wouldn't have 30, 40, 50 years ago," she said. "It's much more of an effective tool now, given the small number of companies that can control the mainstream media."

"Defending lawsuits always takes time and resources — and adds stress," Shapiro said. "And the stress becomes even greater when so many institutions are capitulating. Universities and law firms are capitulating, and journalists are left wondering, 'What's going to happen when they come for my newsroom?'"

Trump alluded to the types of harms these lawsuits threaten after filing his lawsuit against The Wall Street Journal, saying, "I hope Rupert [Murdoch] and his 'friends' are looking forward to the many hours of depositions and testimonies they will have to provide in this case."

Sanders said such lawsuits raise concerns beyond the large national news outlets. They threaten local journalism.

"Not everyone has the resources of The New York Times or Wall Street Journal," Sanders said. "Smaller news organizations are going to be pressured to settle, to try and get out of things quickly, even in instances when they have a really strong case."

These types of cases force organizations to weigh the robust First Amendment protections news organizations have traditionally experienced in the U.S. with financial and political pressures.

"When news organizations settle suits that are winnable or capitulate on demands that could be fought against," Jones said, "they are not misunderstanding law or constitutionalism. They are making an educated guess that the United States is moving into a space in which law and constitutionalism will no longer be important."

The trend, Jones said, is concerning for the future of press freedoms in the U.S.

"It isn't enough to have doctrine on the books that respects or defends press freedom if we have a structural system in which that press freedom cannot, or cannot be, or is not meaningfully, invoked," she added.

Defamation lawsuits aren't the only avenue the administration has used.

The Des Moines Register, its parent company Gannett Corp. (now USA Today Co.), and veteran pollster J. Ann Selzer have not capitulated. They are fighting an Iowa Consumer Fraud Act complaint Trump filed in December 2024 after the presidential election. The lawsuit contends the news organization took part in "brazen election interference" by reporting that a poll just days before the election showed that Harris was leading Trump among Iowa voters. Trump wound up winning Iowa by 13 percentage points, and the complaint argued that the poll was false information that was used to try to influence the election's outcome.

Sanders said the lawsuit was particularly concerning because it targets a source, Selzer, as well as the news organization.

"It makes nearly everyone think twice about whether or not they want to speak to the press," she said. "[Selzer] has a bulletproof reputation in terms of the work that she has done and so, to see her targeted, makes other experts, I think, nervous about sharing information with the press."

"If news organizations like CBS and ABC settle lawsuits that they could win, it only empowers bullying tactics against other news organizations."

CHRIS TERRY, MEDIA LAW SCHOLAR AND

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

SEE YOU IN COURT

Tump's multibillion-dollar lawsuit against CBS News and another against ABC News weren't aberrations. He sued The New York Times in September, seeking \$15 billion in defamation damages. After the lawsuit was dismissed, he refiled a new version in October. Similarly, he sued The Wall Street Journal in July for \$10 billion for its reporting about his relationship with Jeffery Epstein. Trump sued the BBC in December, contending that the way a documentary about the Jan. 6 riot at the Capitol edited his speech that day was defamatory. All three cases are ongoing.

Lawsuits such as these represent another increasingly potent tool for threatening the press — weaponizing the court system. Government officials and others with financial means can file lawsuits that, even if they have little chance of achieving a legal victory, drain news organizations' resources, increase stress and trauma for journalists, and chill factual reporting.



A CALL FOR SOLIDARITY

When President Barack Obama sought to limit Fox News' access to the White House in 2009, after claims that the organization was biased in its coverage of his administration, major broadcast and cable news networks stood in solidarity against the efforts. News organizations exerted a united front of pressure on the administration, and it relented.

"Everyone stood up for them and that did it," Sanders said. "Solidarity won the game there."

Sanders contrasted the episode with the AP's experience in March, when few news organizations backed up the news cooperative after the Trump administration removed it from the White House press pool. Experts said solidarity within the news media will be crucial for the future of press rights.

"Solidarity is the answer," Terry said. "If major news organizations like CBS and ABC settle lawsuits that they could win, it only empowers bullying tactics against other news organizations." ■

Terry said larger news organizations must stand up against threats, lawsuits, and access limitations, because smaller operations don't have the same resources.

Similarly, Jones characterized discussions about press freedom on two levels. She emphasized that First Amendment protections for press rights in the U.S. remain strong. However, those rights are only valuable if they are claimed by news organizations.

"We're operating on a question about what the law needs to be in order to protect the press," she said, describing one level. "And then, in a very concrete operational level about whether those existing rights can be, or will be, invoked by the parties who could use them to defend themselves."

Sanders said the collective approach also applies to speaking against false rhetoric and attacks on reporting.

"We need to do more in our stories to explain what we do," she said, "to be transparent with our audience about how we gather our information and to have other people help tell our audiences, 'Yes, this is important. It doesn't matter that President Trump calls the press the enemy of the people. They aren't, and here's why.'" ■

Independent pollster J. Ann Selzer is pictured in West Des Moines, Iowa, in November 2024. Selzer became a target of a lawsuit after the Des Moines Register reported on one of her polls, a move press freedom experts say could discourage experts from speaking to journalists.

GENERATION DISCORD

Uprisings fomented on social media, like the one that recently swept Nepal, catch legacy journalism by surprise

BY SUBINA SHRESTHA



The black pirate flag was the first thing I noticed.

Although I had seen the Jolly Roger image of a skull and crossbones before, this one was distinct: a grinning cartoon skull wearing a straw hat — the flag of a fictional gang of pirates fighting oppression and corruption in the Japanese anime series “One Piece.”

When it first started appearing in early 2025 on the TikTok and Instagram feeds of young people taking to the streets during protests in Indonesia, I paid it little heed. That was until my 13-year-old daughter pointed out that the “Straw Hat Jolly Roger” had started circulating on social media in reference to my home country of Nepal.

The One Piece pirate flag — now heralded globally as a symbol of youth resistance — first started showing up in Nepal in early September 2025. Within days it had caught digital fire, culminating in a youth-led uprising that would topple Nepal’s government, leave the country’s political class reeling, and stun the nation’s mainstream media over its failure to understand power, shape narrative, and comprehend the ways in which a new generation was mobilizing.

As a journalist who has covered Nepal and the region for over two decades, I’m still processing those historic few days in September. What I find most unsettling is the fact that my teenage children — who insist they don’t follow any mainstream news — saw it coming long before I did.

The dramatic turn of events in Nepal, and the manner in which they unfolded, have since become a template of sorts for protests in many countries, led by a generation that insists on defining its own narratives, employing digital tools, and spreading its message through internet memes, Instagram Reels, and posts on video gaming platforms like Discord.

Since the Nepal uprising there have been similar protests in Madagascar, Morocco, Peru, Bulgaria, and beyond, where governments have been swiftly overthrown or leaders have been put on notice by a groundswell that starts on social media. Many participants in these movements, especially in Nepal, identify as members of Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012 and currently between 13 and 28 years old.

These spontaneous, youth-led, social media-driven uprisings across several countries appear to be less anchored in a shared global ideology, according to experts, but instead in a common grievance: the sense of a broken social contract.

“The level of conflict in these societies comes from that big chasm between a rapidly changing society and political systems that don’t keep up,” said Aboubakr Jamaï, a Moroccan journalist (and 2007-08 Nieman Fellow) who has studied protests from the February 20 Movement in Morocco during the Arab Spring uprisings, to the more recent Gen Z-led protests around the world.

In many of these countries, corruption — often manifested in failing government services — emerges as a core grievance that’s central to young people’s sense of frustration. A report by Bloomberg Economics — which used a machine-learning model to analyze 22 million data points related to youth-led global protests — has come to a similar conclusion: Rising inequality, unemployment, and corruption are strong predictors of youth-led unrest. The same analysis highlights several global hot spots that are at heightened risk of upheaval in the near future, including Angola, Guatemala, the Republic of Congo, and Malaysia.

“This generation does not benefit from what their grandparents, and to some extent their parents, received,” Jamaï said. “They feel short-changed.”

THE SPARK

The trigger for Nepal’s protests is a familiar tool of authoritarian control: censorship.

On Sept. 4, Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli, then in his third term, abruptly banned more than two dozen social media apps, including Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, and Instagram. Discord, a communication platform mainly used by video gamers, escaped the initial crackdown and would soon be repurposed as a powerful organizing tool.



The government’s justification was regulatory, saying that foreign social media companies had failed to register locally. It also claimed to be curbing misinformation, hate speech and fraud, and enforcing accountability on international platforms. But the subtext was clear to many: Stifle dissent.

In a country where more than half the population uses the internet daily, and where social media is interwoven with commerce, self-expression, and news consumption, the ban was catastrophic.

Downloads of virtual private network software — used to circumvent restrictions on the internet — skyrocketed by 8,000% in Nepal within days. Far from silencing criticism, the ban ignited it. Online platforms quickly transformed into underground channels and forums for defiance.

Leading up to the ban, Oli had been perturbed by a growing chorus of social media posts with hashtags including “nepokid” and “nepobabies” — aimed at calling attention to government corruption by comparing the privileged lives of the children of political leaders to those of ordinary Nepalis. The nepobaby trend, according to protest organizers, had been inspired by young people in the Philippines, who had tapped into growing public outrage aimed at the tone-deaf children of government officials — especially those tied to a corruption scandal over flood management contracts — who liked

to flaunt things like luxury fashion items on their own social feeds.

In Nepal, the backlash over the social media ban ricocheted across the diaspora. With Nepalis living in more than 180 countries — and, by some estimates, 1,500 to 3,000 leaving the country each day amid chronic unemployment, especially among young people — labor migration has become a way of life for many. Remittances are now such an integral part of Nepal’s economy that money sent home by workers abroad accounts for roughly one-quarter of its gross domestic product.

The diaspora is intimately tied to its homeland by social media platforms, and many were outraged that they could no longer reach family members over WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger. Meanwhile, small businesses that relied on social media stalled, and a huge source of information and ties to the outside world ground to a halt.

Young people quickly mobilized, announcing a protest for Sept. 8. It was largely planned over Discord, with organizers sharing QR codes to connect to servers with names like YouthAgainstCorruption. Traffic in these online groups quickly swelled to thousands of participants. Conversations were peppered with queries like “What should we do if they start attacking?” or “how to make molotov cocktails.” Although many of those participating in the discussions were activists who al-

Students rally in Kathmandu on Sept. 8, 2025, after a government ban on social media triggered widespread protests largely organized online. The Gen Z-led revolt in Nepal — which referenced symbols like the “Straw Hat Jolly Roger” from the Japanese anime series “One Piece” — have since inspired youth-led uprisings across the globe.

PREVIOUS PAGE: From left, Ayush, Prakriti Giri, Tanuja Pandey, and Pragyan Subedi — youth organizers who participated in the September 2025 uprising in Kathmandu, Nepal — gather at the ruins of the Varnabas Museum Hotel, which was destroyed during the unrest. Sparked by a government crackdown on social media, the protests toppled the government and caught legacy media off guard.

PREVIOUS PAGE: SKANDA GAUTAM

ABHISHEK MAHARJAN/PTI VIA AP

THE UPRISING SHOWED HOW NETWORKED, DIGITALLY DRIVEN ORGANIZING CAN DESTABILIZE LONG-ENTRENCHED SYSTEMS IN A MATTER OF DAYS.

ready had social media followings, the movement was purposefully and avowedly leaderless. Many joined in the conversations anonymously.

“We did mock protests on the 6th and the 7th and laid out a basic plan of action,” said Ayush Basyal, a 26-year-old student who teaches the Nepali language online, often to the children of the diaspora. Basyal, who helped organize the protests, said he and his team experimented with artificial intelligence tools in attempts to refine the language and visual grammar of the planned resistance. They tested memes on the AI chatbot Perplexity and ChatGPT, to see which ones might gain traction or resonate as slogans. On Instagram, phrases including “We meme, therefore we are” and “We won’t logout of democracy” went viral ahead of the protest march. Some of those posts were later deleted after organizers faced harassment and blame for the unrest that followed.

Just how leaderless the protests were quickly became apparent. Some organizers encouraged protesters to join the marches wearing their school uniforms and circulated checklists for participating — Bring sunblock, hats, water bottles — as if they were going on a field trip. Some emphasized that the protests would be peaceful, while other anonymous accounts shared tips for engaging in violent pushback.

Meanwhile, as momentum was building largely online, much of Nepal’s mainstream media was focused elsewhere, including reporting on a three-day conference being held by the prime minister’s party at which Oli complained about young people and defended the social media ban.

Those in tune with the growing protest movement had been hearing that a large crowd was planning to gather on Sept. 8, and some even tried warning the authorities, including a few children of police officers who tried to sound the alarm to their parents. But authorities appear to have downplayed the rumors, or dismissed them as just another one of the frequent, small protests by discontented youths that are commonplace in Nepal.

TWO DRAMATIC DAYS

On the morning of Sept. 8, crowds began to gather at the Maitighar Mandala junction in the heart of the city center in Kathmandu — a traditional starting point for protest marches. Because of the leaderless structure of the gathering, different social media posts had publicized conflicting start times for the march. Nevertheless, by about 11 a.m., thousands of people had begun marching toward parliament.

The police appeared to be woefully unprepared. An undermanned barrier blocking a road near the parliament building was quickly overrun. Some protesters turned violent, throwing bricks and attacking the outnumbered police. The authorities hastily ordered a curfew — though few heard the warnings — then police opened fire on the crowds, and according to reports, used live ammunition, water cannons, batons, tear gas, and rubber bullets. Seventeen young protesters were

killed outside parliament and two others elsewhere in the hours that followed. Many more were injured.

The killings by police of young protesters, some in school uniforms, fueled the growing outrage. On the second day of the protests the crowds grew, expanding to include people of many age groups. Amid widespread disorder, the police retreated. Politicians’ homes, and public buildings — including parliament, the Supreme Court, several ministries and some private businesses — were burned in an arson spree that started in Kathmandu and spread to other cities across Nepal.

Onlookers used their phones to broadcast live feeds as political leaders, including the prime minister, had to be rescued by army helicopters. By the end of the week, the death toll had increased to more than 70 people. Thousands of inmates escaped prison, with over 4,000 still missing. Property worth millions of dollars had been destroyed. The prime minister resigned.

While this dizzying series of events was being broadcast around the world, Nepal’s legacy media was caught completely off guard.

The reasons why things developed so quickly and unexpectedly, and the ways in which they were organized and by whom, will likely be debated for years to come. But one thing is clear: The mainstream media initially missed out, and struggled to catch up, on one of the biggest stories in the nation’s recent history — largely because it had taken shape on communication platforms that many journalists had been ignoring — and continue to ignore — at their peril.

GAMES, REALITY, AND RISK

Those who were present at the parliament on the first day of the protests, including members of the police, reported being startled by the strange behavior of the protesters. As officers fired live rounds into the advancing crowds, instead of dispersing, many demonstrators continued to move toward them. Footage from the scene shows someone shouting the word “PUBG!” at various intervals throughout the protest.

To make sense of this term, I turned to my colleague, Rafid Hossain, who has been analyzing social media footage from Nepal’s protests as part of an open-source investigative documentary we’re working on for the BBC.

Hossain explained that PUBG — or PlayerUnknown’s Battleground — refers to an online multiplayer “battle royale” genre of video game that has anywhere from dozens to thousands of people playing it at any given moment, fighting to be the last one standing. For many young people, Hossain included, games like PUBG are not merely entertainment, but an integral part of the media environment they inhabit.

In the game, players are dropped off alone or in teams onto a vast battlefield where survival depends on strategy, split-second decision-making, and astute combat awareness in an atmosphere that is tense and unpredictable. It develops a mindset in players that can sometimes bleed into real life, Hossain said, adding of the Nepal street demonstrations, “If I were to put myself in a protest like



SUBAAS SHRESTHA/NURPHOTO VIA AP

that, the game would play in my head.”

Others involved in the protests noticed a similar phenomena, with video game references front and center.

“In the game, you have to communicate with your team members to survive,” said Basyal, the language teacher who helped organize the protests. “When I saw the footage [of the protests], it felt like a manifestation of the game.”

In some of the footage Hossain and I reviewed, we noticed protesters moving in ways recognizable to those who play PUBG: taking cover deliberately, positioning makeshift shields, advancing in short, coordinated bursts. “It was very much like they were in a game,” Hossain said.

In the game, however, death is only temporary. “When you die in PUBG, the round ends — but you can restart in a new arena,” Hossain said. “It makes death feel less frightening.”

On Sept. 8, as protesters continued to push forward toward the line of fire, organizer Rizan Gurung also found himself thinking of the game. “So many protesters thought the guns were like those in PUBG,” he said. “As if, even if you die, you can keep playing.”

Several people who witnessed what played out during the street marches said they saw a dangerous kind of cognitive dissonance among young protesters immersed in the digital world. It was as though they were operating with the kind of risk, repetitive actions,

and survival tactics common in video games, but in a situation where they were not accounting for the fact that death would actually — not virtually — be final.

A GENERATION FUELED BY FRUSTRATION, AND TECHNOLOGY

In the wake of the protests, some of the organizers have reflected on how and why they were able to mobilize so effectively, and quickly, online. Many credit their digital fluency to the COVID-19 pandemic.

“During lockdown, communication and content-consumption patterns changed a lot,” Basyal said. “People got used to talking in online space. That progressed into protest organizing.”

For 24-year-old climate activist-turned-organizer Tanuja Pandey, the protest’s spark was less about ideology than infrastructure. “It wasn’t a deep political awakening at first, it was an algorithm,” she said.

Trends like “fit check” videos — clips of young people styling their protest gear and trading tips on what to wear to take to the streets — circulated alongside more overt calls to action. Thousands of viewers engaged with the content, including many far beyond Nepal. The focus of the comments section often shifted from talk of protester demands to remarking on aesthetics, and how

Protesters pose in front of Nepal’s burning parliament building in Kathmandu on Sept. 9, 2025, amid a youth-led revolt that led to the resignation of Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli. Security forces had opened fire on demonstrators a day earlier, killing at least 19 and injuring many more.

“MAINSTREAM MEDIA [IS] REALLY ON THE BACK FOOT. THEY DON’T GRASP HOW QUICKLY INFORMATION SPREADS, AND THEY DON’T UNDERSTAND HOW TO SHAPE NARRATIVES IN THIS CHANGED WORLD.”

GINA NEFF,
CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY
SOCIOLOGIST

cool members of Gen Z looked. Some of the edgiest video snippets were turned into posters that were plastered across social media.

This continued throughout the protests. On Sept. 9, as many places across Nepal were in flames, social media feeds featured an aesthetic of revolt, with clips featuring young people “aura farming,” (slang for attempting to boost one’s “aura” by doing a repeated action in a cool and effortless way), in front of buildings on fire. The clips were quickly translated, subtitled, and remixed into new formats, circulating across platforms and spreading around the globe.

Although, as one organizer put it, the protests had a sense of “fun,” for others like Pandey, they represented a coming of age for her generation.

“The protests forced us to confront injustice, question systems of power, and decide whether we’d participate, resist, or advocate for change,” she said. Many young people “reacted emotionally” when violence broke out. “Then, for some, [the protests] turned into a political awakening. They helped us develop a sense of responsibility, awareness, and identity,” Pandey added.

Discord, meanwhile, was quickly becoming a global hub for protest planning, linking youth movements from Kathmandu to Casablanca. Among those joining Nepal’s Discord servers were Gen Z activists from other countries who reported drawing tactical inspiration from the discussions they were watching unfold in real time.

Hidden away from the gaze of journalists or politicians, many said the platform — which is largely decentralized, allows for secure, anonymous communication, and features multiple “servers” that can function like individual forums — felt like a safe organizing space. It was rare to find anyone over 35 engaged in the discussions — few older people had seemingly even heard of the platform. One source I interviewed recalled Oli asking in apparent bewilderment: “What is this thing called Discord?”

On Sept. 10, I joined a Facebook livestream of a Discord poll in which people were voting on who should replace Oli as prime minister. It was a method of regime change never quite seen before. Participants appeared with avatars, many of which were faces of anime characters with usernames like “Ghost” and “Jalebi,” and a steady stream of GIFs punctuated serious political arguments over who should run the government.

Members of the Nepali diaspora chimed in from across the world, a unique feature of this new kind of protest, according to Jamaï, the Moroccan journalist who studies youth-led uprisings. For example, the large Moroccan diaspora across Europe has remained politically connected to their homeland and “use their freedoms and resources to challenge the regime from abroad,” Jamaï said.

In Nepal, names floated for leadership ranged from Kathmandu’s rap artist Mayor Balendra Shah to the maverick politician Harka Sampang, the mayor of Dharan — both countercultural figures already mythologized online. The chat moderators struggled to corral the chaos and bring order to the proceedings.

“Our agenda is clear, but we need more than one

representative to negotiate with the army,” one voice chimed in. “Even if just one or two of us are in the interim Cabinet, it will do. We just have to hold an election,” said another.

Following a marathon session more befitting the live video streaming platform Twitch, the young organizers finally coalesced around a candidate they felt had both credibility and independence: former Supreme Court Chief Justice Sushila Karki. She would be appointed interim prime minister — with the quiet backing of Nepal’s president and military — by the end of that week, the first woman to hold the position. She is expected to oversee elections in March to determine who will officially lead the new government going forward.

JOURNALISM ON ITS BACK FOOT

Nepal’s media arrived late to the game. Basanta Basnet, editor of the popular online news portal OnlineKhabar, was candid about the failure of the mainstream media to capture the historic uprising. “Since we became a republic, we failed to be watchdogs,” he said.

Nepal became a federal democratic republic in 2008, following a decadelong civil war between forces backed by the longstanding monarchy and Maoist insurgents. But the young democracy has struggled to find its footing — and many viewed the recent past as a kind of political déjà vu: the same aging leaders, the same political parties, and a constant rotation among prime ministers. Despite a new constitution in 2015 that guaranteed freedom of the press, many feel the mainstream media has focused too heavily on covering constantly shifting party loyalties and backroom deals at the expense of deeper issues.

“We were dragged into party journalism,” Basnet said. “I personally assigned reporters to political parties when I should have focused on public delivery beats like poverty, health, education.”

It was in these areas of society — poverty, health, education, and elsewhere — that the discontent that fueled the protests had been quietly growing, out of view of traditional media. Despite many media outlets adapting to the digital age, technology-wise, Basnet said, they retained old habits. “We function like old print papers, with the same writing styles,” he added.

Multimedia journalist Kamal Prasai put it more bluntly. Even when younger reporters produce creative, platform-native content at the speed of breaking news, “print journalists wouldn’t share it until their text was done. It defeats the purpose,” Prasai said.

In the recent uprisings, footage shot by citizens on smartphones, livestreams, memes and online influencers did what traditional journalism failed to: define in real-time what was happening, why it mattered, and how it felt to be part of it. And young people turned to those sources for up-to-date information and to reflect the reality they were seeing before them — leaving legacy media still further behind.

“Mainstream media and mainstream politics are really on the back foot,” said Gina Neff, an organizational sociologist focusing on technology at Cambridge



Young protesters take selfies at Singha Durbar palace in Kathmandu, one of the government buildings set ablaze during the September 2025 rebellion. As footage spread quickly across social media, participants were able to document and define the uprising in real time — often faster than traditional news outlets could respond to, or verify what was happening.

University. “They don’t grasp how quickly information spreads, and they don’t understand how to shape narratives in this changed world.”

Neff described modern technological platforms as producing “affective publics” driven by emotion. Content that excites or enrages travels faster, because algorithms reward it.

“It can really seem like the world is always on fire,” she said.

Neff is careful not to dismiss Gen Z movements as artificial. “That doesn’t mean all Gen Z protest is the product of algorithmic manipulation — absolutely not,” she said. “But technology amplifies supercharged emotional content, and it makes manipulation easier.”

WHAT’S NEXT FOR JOURNALISM IN NEPAL?

Nepal’s legacy media not only failed to see the uprising developing, but also found itself squarely in its firing line, fueled by the polarized messaging of social media. Arsonists burned down two national news agencies, including Nepal’s largest media house, Kantipur, which had once resisted the monarchy and stood firm in 2005 against King Gyanendra’s censorship.

Activists like Pandey saw the irony in the protesters targeting these legacy outlets.

“We were fighting for freedom of expression,” she said. “Why would we burn down the media?”

Despite disagreeing with the targeting of media outlets, Pandey, like many young activists I spoke to, said she does not entirely trust them. “We don’t need legacy media because social media is already doing that job,” she said.

Blogger Umesh Shrestha (no relation to the author), who has been running a site called Nepal Fact Check for years, shares Pandey’s skepticism.

“Nepal’s media once did more than report news; they actively nurtured democratic values,” he said. Over the years, “partisanship and lack of fact-checking have eroded trust.”

Following the Gen Z protests, Shrestha has been combing through social media images trying to verify their accuracy, adding that AI-generated images have made verification much more difficult, especially when they circulate alongside real footage. Verification of images on the scale of the widespread protests in Nepal takes an enormous amount of time and resources that most newsrooms in the country do not have.

The events that have unfolded in Nepal go far beyond a simple political crisis; it has caused an irreversible rupture in the ways that information and power function. The uprising showed how networked, digitally driven organizing can destabilize long-entrenched systems in a matter of days. Political leaders, once dismissive of social media, now understand their own fragile grasp on power in the face of massive online mobilizations. And traditional media, which has long played a central role in democratic struggles, is now left to confront declining public trust in what it does and the disappearance of the monopoly it once held over shaping the public narrative. It must also figure out ways to reach new audiences where they are — if it wishes to remain relevant.

For journalists in Nepal and beyond, the question now is whether they are willing to meet these challenges.

“We need to re-embed accuracy, verification, and accountability into this new information ecosystem,” said Neff, the Cambridge University sociologist. “The kind of powerful storytelling great journalism has always done is still in demand — but those stories must be told in formats young people can actually find.” ■



FROM RECKONING TO RETREAT

**A U.S. media
push to focus on
diversity, equity
and inclusion
in journalism is
receding**

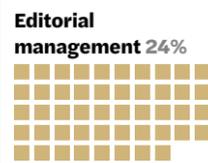
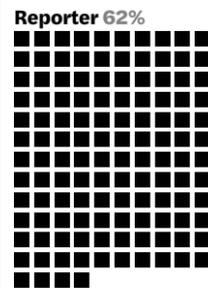
BY HANAA' TAMEEZ

ILLUSTRATIONS BY

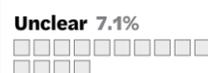
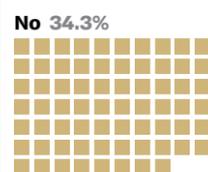
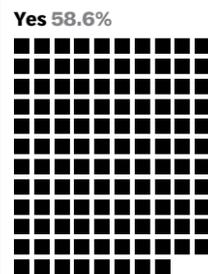
VARTIKA SHARMA



What type of roles were created?



Do the roles still exist?



The killing in 2020 of George Floyd, a Black resident of Minneapolis whose death at the hands of a white police officer was captured on a bystander’s cellphone, triggered massive protests across the United States and sparked a process of “racial reckoning” that touched every corner of society — including journalism.

The Maynard Institute for Journalism Education, a long-established nonprofit focused on “equity, belonging, and diversity in news,” was suddenly flooded with requests to provide diversity training for newsrooms. In a single month, the organization’s co-executive director, Martin Reynolds, personally conducted 20 newsroom training sessions. Between 2020 and 2022, the institute earned \$1.2 million from its training work.

In 2025, that figure dropped to zero. Demand collapsed amid a wider societal retreat from diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives in the U.S. under the new Trump administration.

Educational institutions including Harvard University, home of the Nieman Foundation for Journalism, have also disbanded their DEI offices. The number of S&P 500 companies that reference “diversity, equity, and inclusion” in their annual reports has fallen by nearly 60% since 2024.

Race, diversity, and identity products, initiatives, and divisions have been shut down across the news industry. CBS and NBC axed reporting and producing teams related to race and culture as part of larger newsroom cutbacks. Politico shuttered The Recast, its 4-year-old newsletter about politics, race, and power. Bloomberg stopped sending its Equality newsletter in May (though its Equality reporting team remains). The Washington Post’s About US newsletter, which promised “Candid conversations about race and identity in 21st century America,” was placed “on hiatus” last June; it has not

returned.

Media companies have also become less likely to publicly share workforce data than they were in previous years. Gannett (now USA Today Co.) said last April that it would stop publishing company demographic information, citing the “evolving regulatory environment” of President Donald Trump’s second term. A spokesperson said the company remains committed to “treating all our employees with respect and ensuring a culture of belonging.”

Quantifying a “culture of belonging” may not be possible in the news industry. It’s historically been difficult to track diversity in newsrooms, and the political right’s demonization of DEI only aggravated the challenges in reporting on how the newsroom diversification pledges that followed the killing of George Floyd have fared. Interview requests submitted by this author to more than 70 people about DEI in their newsrooms mostly went unanswered, while many of those who did respond weren’t willing to go on the record, even anonymously, because they said they feared retaliation from their employers or jeopardizing their own job prospects.

Numbers can’t tell the whole story, but they can show a slice of it. An examination of public announcements, industry publications, and social media posts shows that at least 169 full-time journalism jobs related to race, diversity, and equality were posted and filled between June 2020 — shortly after Floyd’s murder in Minneapolis — and December 2024. The jobs bore titles like “race and equality reporter,” “inequality reporter,” “deputy inequality editor,” “chief diversity and inclusion officer,” and so on.

Most of the roles created (62%) were reporting positions, meaning that the majority of the roles didn’t have explicit power to implement change in newsroom operations or culture. About a quarter (23%) were team, desk, or managing editor positions. And 12% were management-level roles, like company heads, vice presidents, and directors of diversity and inclusion.

“These numbers reflect a long-standing pattern in desegregating journalism: that most efforts are concentrated at levels with the least amount of editorial



influence,” Meredith D. Clark, associate professor of race and political communication at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, said after reviewing the data. Clark resigned from her position running the News Leaders Association’s annual diversity survey in 2022, saying she’d “been met with the kind of crushing resistance that you would expect when you’re trying to do things that contribute to structural and systemic change.”

“Reporting roles are essential,” Clark added, “but editors are directly responsible for what reporters cover, and who gets to cover what.”

The roles in the sample of 169 jobs spanned various media, including newspapers (37%), digital-only outlets (25%), radio stations (15%), networks like CNN and ABC (11%), and wire services (8%). The majority (78%) of these roles were created between 2020 and 2022. The numbers dropped dramatically after that, suggesting that news organizations may have lessened their focus



I think people were hoping that there would be some magical fix to decades of inequity and underresourcing.”

**DORIS TRUONG
FORMER SENIOR
DIRECTOR OF DIVERSITY
STRATEGIES AT THE
POYNTER INSTITUTE**

on diversity-related jobs well before Trump’s second term began. Diverse hiring in general has also slowed.

As early as 2023, Sara Guaglione reported for Digiday that media companies like The New York Times, Vox Media, Condé Nast, and Hearst made marginal gains in diversity but were still mostly hiring white people. By 2025, Guaglione found that “major publishers are making barely perceptible progress, and in some cases — none at all.”

More than half of the 169 DEI-related jobs (59%) still existed as of Sept. 1, 2025, but a third (34%) had vanished.

Of the 99 roles that still existed, 67% were reporter roles, 18% were editorial management roles, and 12% were in management. For 12 roles (7%), it was unclear whether the positions still existed, since not all newsrooms publish or update newsroom staff directories, which were used to verify some statistics. Two roles no longer exist because the organizations shut down.

“There is reason to be cautiously optimistic about the slight uptick in the retention figures for executive leadership positions,” Clark said. But, she added, “we should also question whether this number climbed a percentage point because of a lasting commitment to equity in hiring and promotion or just positions that needed to be filled anyway.”

Of the 58 roles that no longer existed, more than half (55%) were reporter roles, 32% were editorial management roles, and 10% were management roles. The data collected doesn’t show whether newsrooms made real changes to become more equitable work environments.

“It’s sort of like saying you have one Black friend,” a Black journalist formerly with National Public Radio said. “You may have one, but what are you doing to either keep them happy or to pave the way to have more people like them in these positions? What are you actually doing behind the scenes and in the newsrooms to retain talent and to recruit new talent externally to bring them into the fold?”

At the same time, DEI trainings have changed and are in less demand.

The Maynard Institute is not alone in seeing decreased demand for its training sessions: Companies of all types are cutting them. Reynolds, the institute’s co-executive director, said some of the news organizations that requested trainings weren’t serious about them. While lower-level staff members attended and engaged, sometimes the leaders who had requested them didn’t attend.

“The people who needed it most, in many instances, were the ones that skirted it,” Reynolds said, adding: “If a news executive comes in, says hello, and then rolls out, that tells you they’re not really committed to this.”

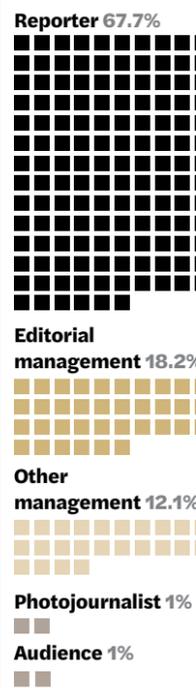
Doris Truong, who led the Poynter Institute’s diversity-focused training services for newsrooms between 2020 and 2023, also saw high initial demand. “I think people were hoping that there would be some magical fix to decades of inequity and underresourcing,” she said.

Sitara Nieves, Poynter’s vice president of teaching and organizational strategy, said newsrooms’ training needs have evolved since 2020. At the beginning of the decade, requests were “often urgent and broad, reflecting a widespread recognition that many newsrooms were fundamentally rethinking their efforts — or sometimes starting from scratch,” she said. News organizations sought “basic workshops on bias, inclusion fundamentals, and how to create more equitable newsroom cultures.”

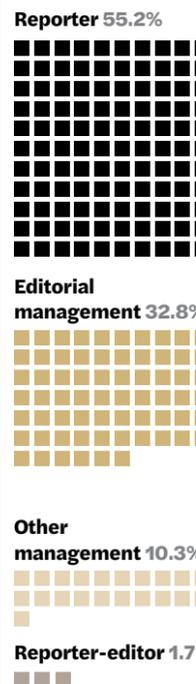
Over the past few years, inquiries have “become more nuanced and specialized.”

“There are many reasons for that, including that some organizations have brought those early efforts in-house,” Nieves said. “Organizations are increasingly looking for training on specific challenges: how to recruit and retain talent, strategies for inclusive leadership at all levels of the organization, managing conflict around how to do all this work effectively and responsibly, and how to use data to understand how to reflect

What are the roles that still exist?



Which roles no longer exist?



the needs and interests of local communities served.” Larry Graham is the founder and CEO of the Diversity Pledge Institute. He left the American Press Institute in 2021 to launch DPI as an organization focused on diverse hiring, mentorship, and journalism skills.

In its first two years, most of DPI’s revenue came from helping newsrooms with recruiting and executive searches, Graham said. There was enough interest that DPI was able to hire four full-time employees in 2022. Between 2021 and 2025, he said, DPI helped place more than 70 journalists in a range of roles in more than 20 newsrooms across the U.S.

Now, Graham said, “there’s an added layer of fear around diversity because of the Trump administration,” and business has slowed.

“I still have newsrooms that are engaged and supportive, but I feel like I get fewer responses than I did when we launched,” Graham said. “Since diversity seems to have become somewhat politicized, it has made things a lot more challenging.”

In her trainings, Truong said she stressed that DEI work must not be the responsibility of any single person or team. She pointed to the example, common before 2020, of “a very homogenous newsroom [with] somebody who’s tokenized in some respect.” The tokenized person was often “just kind of deputized” into leading the diversity committee or project, with little consideration.

“That’s a huge job to put on anybody,” Truong said. “What kind of resources are you going to give that person? Does this person even want to do it?”

Over the past few years, journalists and other staffers have banded together to create diversity committees in their newsrooms. One goal of these committees was to improve elements of the workplace beyond diverse hiring.

The committees and teams have had mixed success. In 2020, when then-CNN President Jeff Zucker suggested in a staff town hall meeting that the network appoint a reporter to cover race in America, Delano Massey, a Black editor who had recently joined the network, told Zucker that he didn’t think that was the right approach. Instead, Massey said, CNN should form a race and equality team. Zucker agreed, and said Massey — who previously oversaw the AP’s race and ethnicity team — should be the one to lead it.

At the time, Massey was the supervising producer overseeing coverage of the Department of Justice, the Supreme Court, and the Department of Homeland Security.

“I didn’t necessarily want my career to be defined as the race guy,” he said. “The fear I had was that people would put me into a box and say, ‘This is all he can do.’”

Still, Massey agreed to lead CNN’s team in addition to keeping his current job. (He did not get a raise.)

Massey hoped to create a blueprint for how CNN’s entire news operation could benefit from the newly created team. His goal, he said, was to produce thoughtful, substantive stories — across CNN, not just in a siloed vertical — that showed how race and inequality were

connected to other issues. He held town halls and paired beat reporters with race reporters.

For one story about racial disparities during the pandemic, senior race and equality writer Nicquel Terry Ellis worked with a business reporter to explore how the lack of pharmacies on Chicago’s South Side contributed to a COVID-19 vaccine shortage.

Massey left CNN for Axios in April 2022. In July 2024 — exactly four years after it launched — CNN’s race and equality team was disbanded and its reporters dispersed to different desks across the newsroom. (CNN said at the time that its commitment to equitable reporting was still “100% there.”)

Charlie Vargas, who is Latino, has been a features reporter at Southern California News Group (SCNG) since 2021. The company, which operates 11 local newspapers, is part of MediaNews Group, owned by Alden Global Capital.

Vargas started working for SCNG in 2021 and joined its diversity committee shortly thereafter. Recently, the committee launched a newsroom-wide mentorship program that pairs new reporters with more experienced ones to collaborate on stories. The committee also created a Slack channel to discuss DEI and other topics, including community feedback on stories.

While the committee’s roles and initiatives have changed several times because of staff turnover, Vargas said its main focus has been on interviewing job candidates through a diversity lens — asking them where they grew up, what their cultural experiences have been, and which issues they believe could be represented better in SCNG coverage. The committee passes its feedback on to hiring managers, who are ultimately responsible for filling the positions.

As the data collected for this report suggests, it’s relatively easy for many newsrooms to diversify their lower ranks by hiring younger, less experienced employees from marginalized backgrounds into entry-level roles. But when it’s time to make budget cuts, those newer employees are often the first to go. That was the case in 2024 when the Los Angeles Times laid off 120 staffers, of which 63 were union members of color.

It is the case at other outlets, too. A reporter at a California public radio station said that layoffs this year disproportionately affected people of color who had recently been hired. These people, the reporter said, were the same ones who’d been covering or pushing for more coverage of underrepresented communities.

For journalists of color, wage disparities can exacerbate the problem.

Unions representing staffers at The Philadelphia Inquirer, The Washington Post, Gannett (USA Today), the Los Angeles Times, and others have uncovered wage disparities between white employees and employees of color. In 2018, the L.A. Times Guild found that white men in the union were paid 30% more than women of color; two years later, the Times paid \$3 million to settle a class-action lawsuit that claimed women and journalists of color were paid less than their white male colleagues. In 2021, 14 unionized Gannett newsrooms reported a 27% median wage gap between white men



As long as we continue to [consider] diversity as an additive, as opposed to fundamental to our newsrooms and their missions, this is not going to work.”

**S. MITRA KALITA
CO-FOUNDER AND CEO OF
URL MEDIA**

A version of this story first appeared in Nieman Lab.



and employees of color. A Washington Post Guild pay study in 2022 found that white men earned 23% more than women of color.

Pay is inextricably linked to achieving diversity, equity, and inclusion in journalism. Studies suggest that concrete initiatives like pay equity and standardizing hiring processes are some of the most effective ways to retain employees of color, while short-term efforts like implicit bias trainings can be less effective.

After 2020, newsrooms made some positive changes, noted S. Mitra Kalita, a 30-year news veteran and the co-founder of URL Media, a consortium of minority-owned local media outlets. But many of those changes, she observed — teams covering race, DEI officers, and “people at the corporate level focused on DEI” — were only “short-term helpful.”

“As long as we continue to [consider] diversity as an additive, as opposed to fundamental to our newsrooms and their missions, this is not going to work,” she said.

Explicit language around DEI is going away, too. Last April, Thomson Reuters renamed its “diversity and inclusion” efforts as “inclusion and belonging,” citing Trump’s demand that federal agencies halt DEI initiatives and remove any related language in an executive order titled “Ending Radical And Wasteful Government DEI Programs And Preferencing.” In May, Bloomberg renamed its DEI team the “HR Inclusion” team, and Nexstar Media, owner of hundreds of local TV stations, removed references to DEI from its website.

Can the mission that many newsrooms seemed to embrace in 2020 continue if it’s called something else entirely?

“Even though this moment is scary and perilous, what we teach is that it’s not the time to shrink from the responsibility we have to serve and reflect local audiences,” Poynter’s Nieves said. “We can get even clearer about our values and journalistic purpose, and our commitments to serving and reflecting our audiences. That includes in hiring, story assignments, source development, editorial decision-making, and newsroom culture.”

But the idea of “changing the language but keeping the charge” is a difficult one to accept in an industry that deals in words, Reynolds, of the Maynard Institute, said. He sees “the attack on [the words] ‘diversity, equity, inclusion’ as an attack on the First Amendment and freedom of speech,” and worries that journalists aren’t “comfortable” fighting for those words.

Massey, the former CNN supervising producer, stressed that just because the political climate has changed doesn’t mean that the promises newsrooms made in 2020 should.

“If we can reckon with where things were in 2020, and we know that some things are wrong, then it doesn’t automatically just revert because of what’s happening in this climate,” he said. “If we think that it is actually right to include others, if we think that we should have diverse newsrooms, or we should be more inclusive in the way that we approach coverage of communities ... all of that can’t just get undone in a climate that’s hot.” ■



DANGEROUSLY UNDERREPORTED

**Sudan's journalists risk their lives
to tell the story of their homeland as
the world turns away**

BY ISMA'IL KUSHKUSH

You wouldn't know it from the preponderance of headlines, but the world's biggest humanitarian crisis is not in Gaza or Ukraine. It's in Sudan, and it began in April 2023, when fighting broke out between the national army, the Sudanese Armed Forces, and its erstwhile ally, a paramilitary group called the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). The violence has consumed the country, with some estimates putting the death toll as high as 400,000, and with widespread rape and looting, 12 million people displaced, and 25 million facing hunger.

"I don't think I've ever seen as big of a disconnect between the scale of a crisis and the scale of media coverage in my life," said Tom Perriello, who was U.S. special envoy to Sudan in the last year of the Biden administration. "And that is both because the scale of the suffering in Sudan is so high and because the [media] coverage is abominably low."

PREVIOUS PAGE: Kamal Elsadig, editor of Radio Dabanga and a leader of the Sudan Media Forum, at work in Amsterdam in 2025. He has spent years coordinating coverage from exile as war and repression have devastated Sudan's independent press.

“I don't think I've ever seen as big of a disconnect between the scale of a crisis and the scale of media coverage in my life.... The scale of the suffering in Sudan is so high and the [media] coverage is abominably low.”
Tom Perriello, former U.S. special envoy to Sudan

An assault in late October on the city of El Fasher, where eyewitness accounts suggest that RSF fighters massacred thousands of civilians, received some attention. But that only underscored the extent to which the international media has neglected Sudan's war as newsrooms struggle financially, and wars in the Middle East and Eastern Europe — places of greater strategic importance to the West — consume much of the world's bandwidth when it comes to human misery.

There was a time when Sudan routinely made headlines. Two decades ago, up to 300,000 people in the Darfur region of western Sudan — most of them from Black non-Arab villages presumed to support local rebels who had taken up arms against an oppressive government in Khartoum — were killed by militiamen allied with the army and government forces, or died from hunger or disease. Human rights advocates — even the U.S. government — called it a genocide. The violence drew the attention of U.S. activists, politicians, and Hollywood celebrities, notably George Clooney. “Save Darfur” signs began appearing in front yards.

The situation today is arguably worse. But the narrative that Sudan is barely being covered eclipses the important role that Sudanese journalists — at least 32 of whom have been killed in the current war — have played for decades as they struggle to let the world know what is happening in their homeland.

■ A GLOBAL STORY MADE PERSONAL

I grew up hearing about Sudan from my parents. It was their homeland, and in their telling a place of vast beauty and vast potential. In the 1970s, they moved to the United States — where I was born and spent much of my childhood — so my father could attend graduate school.

He loved to remind me that Sudan was the biggest country in Africa and had enough farmable land to become a breadbasket of the world. On yearly family visits, we would relax on the banks of the Nile and take in museum collections of ancient artifacts. Little of the Sudan I knew appeared in mainstream news coverage, which was understandably dominated by urgent stories about famine and war and usually failed to probe beyond sweeping generalizations of “African” against “Arab” or “Christian” against “Muslim.” If my non-Sudanese friends had even heard of Sudan, it was thanks to “We Are the World,” the 1985 single recorded to raise money for famine relief in Africa.

I had just graduated from high school when Omar al-Bashir took power in 1989 in a coup. Reliable information became much harder to find as his dictatorship cracked down on the press. State-owned media dutifully delivered mundane government announcements while independent or opposition media outlets became targets for harassment, censorship, and arrests.

Many Sudanese journalists went into exile, and as the internet took off in the early 2000s they began to establish independent media outlets that focused on Sudan from abroad. The Sudan Tribune, an online publication with editions in English and Arabic, is edited

from Paris. SudaneseOnline, which is put together in Arizona, became a trusted source for news and analysis. The Ayin Network, based in Nairobi, sought to provide deeper coverage of violence in the Nuba Mountains with support from development agencies and pro-democracy institutions in Europe and the United States — and later expanded its coverage to all of Sudan.

At the same time, the advent of regional Arabic-language satellite TV channels — Doha, Qatar-based Al Jazeera, and Saudi-owned Al Arabiya and Al Hadath — offered another source of news about Sudan. The networks weren't above criticism or immune from state repression, but they were far more trustworthy than state-controlled media and attracted tens of millions of viewers in the Middle East and North Africa.

I eventually became a journalist and in 2007 moved to Khartoum to put my knowledge of Sudan to use and try my hand as a freelancer. There were only a handful of Khartoum-based correspondents for English-language media. The plan was to stay four months. It turned into eight years. Bashir's government made it difficult for journalists to travel freely or even take photographs in public.

I left Sudan in 2015 to pursue a graduate degree. Four years later, Reporters Without Borders ranked Sudan 175th out of 180 countries in its annual World Press Freedom Index.

But that April, the nonviolent protests that became known as the Sudanese Revolution, and the collapse of the dictatorship, opened a new era of hope for the country — and for its press. With Bashir on trial for the 1989 military coup, a transitional government announced that democratic elections would be held in about three years. State-owned media began covering local protests and airing debates over topics that were once off limits, such as establishing diplomatic ties with Israel.

“It was a win for journalism,” said Shamael Elnoor, a former columnist for the independent Al-Tayyar newspaper who once was forced to leave the country after Bashir's uncle accused her of blasphemy.

Then, on Oct. 25, 2021, the military took over the government in a coup. Journalists were arrested. “The next day they raided our office, broke the doors and some equipment,” said Elhag Warrag, the founder of the independent Al-Dimuqrati newspaper.

When I went back to Sudan in April 2022 to work on a research project and a memoir, internationally brokered negotiations were underway between the military and civilians. That August, the Sudanese Journalists Syndicate, an independent trade union that had been banned under Bashir, was revived along with hopes of greater protections for the press. But bigger problems loomed: The alliance between the country's top two military leaders — the heads of the army and the RSF — was starting to fall apart.

■ THE WAR BEGINS

On the morning of Saturday, April 15, 2023, I was in my studio apartment in downtown Khartoum getting ready to shop for the Eid al-Fitr holiday when I heard



rapid gunfire. From my balcony, I could see government vehicles racing down a one-way street in the wrong direction. I videoed what I could with my iPhone and posted it on Twitter (now known as X). Fighting between the Sudanese army and the RSF had begun.

“This is the worst-case scenario,” I explained in an interview with Sky News. A network from India wanted to interview me over Skype with the city visible behind me. But with rumors of snipers in my neighborhood and no protective gear, I decided it was too dangerous.

Soon the electricity cut off and internet service was flitting in and out. With a laptop and two cellphones barely charged, I had no choice but to turn down more interview requests. I needed my phones for urgent communications. I spent the next nine days trapped in my apartment building with 31 people. We finally managed to leave after negotiating with RSF fighters outside. I made it to another part of town and eventually by bus across the border into Egypt.

Across the Sudanese capital, RSF fighters were occupying, looting or destroying media offices. The morning the fighting began, they stormed the offices of Sudan TV and cut short a live broadcast.

Sabah Mohammad Al-Hassan, a 35-year-old columnist with the independent newspaper Aljazeera, was trapped alone at her family's home in a Khartoum suburb. She managed to publish a column online the day the war broke out, arguing that the army and the RSF both bore responsibility for the war. The headline: “Stop! You both lose!”

“I wrote my opinion from the first day,” she told me. For the next two months, she continued to write from home, surviving on lentils, chickpeas, and rice, and barely venturing outside. Finally, RSF soldiers who had raided the neighborhood arrived at her door and forced her to leave.



She fled to her family's ancestral town of Shendi, a three-hour drive north, and continued to publish columns. Then one day she was watching state-owned television when she heard her name in a long list of civilian leaders and some journalists wanted by the army for allegedly supporting the RSF. She escaped concealed under a long abaya, eventually making it to Egypt to continue her work.

Hundreds of Sudanese journalists have found themselves displaced or jobless. Some media outlets relocated to Port Sudan along the Red Sea, where top leaders and staff of the Sudanese army regrouped to form a de facto government.

The army briefly detained three journalists from the

ABOVE: One of many newsrooms destroyed by the Rapid Support Forces, a paramilitary group, is seen in Khartoum, Sudan, in September 2025.

BELOW: Sudanese journalists celebrate the Sudanese Journalists Syndicate election in 2022, the country's first free trade union vote in 30 years.

PREVIOUS PAGE: MOUNEB TAIM

TOP: REUTERS RIGHT: ISMA'IL KUSHKUSH

Compounding their pain, Sudanese journalists say it often feels like nobody outside their country is watching.

Sudan Tribune, whose offices were looted, and the RSF expelled two of its correspondents from territory it held in Darfur. Of its 14 Sudan-based reporters, five wound up relocating to Cairo or Kampala, Uganda. Journalists from many other outlets did the same.

New independent media outlets also emerged, including Atar Magazine, which attracted attention with articles that captured the desperate voices of ordinary people trapped in the fighting. The Sudan War Monitor, a collaboration of volunteer journalists and open-source researchers who gather intelligence, pieced together stories by analyzing cellphone videos, GPS data, and other digital sources. “We knew no one was going to cover [the war],” said Alsanousi Adam, a journalist with the team. Among his publication’s biggest scoops was a video that showed army intelligence officers executing detainees and bragging about it to each other.

■ A BATTLE ON MANY FRONTS

One major challenge for Sudanese journalists has been countering a flood of misinformation and propaganda — much of it propagated by the RSF or the Sudanese military. Both sides publish websites, PDF

newspapers, and social media posts. The army uses the hashtag #ma'rakat al-karama, which means “battle of dignity,” on X, Facebook, and Telegram. The RSF uses #ma'rakat al-dimuqratiya, or “battle for democracy.” “Both sides in the conflict have actively conducted propaganda campaigns, deliberately embedding misleading and false information into their messaging to strengthen their respective narratives,” said Nihal Abdellatif, a project coordinator at Beam Reports, an independent fact-checking organization that was founded in 2021 in Khartoum but relocated to Nairobi, Kenya, during the war. “We have witnessed new and increasingly sophisticated forms of disinformation that spread faster and are more challenging to verify, notably the use of AI.”

In another effort aimed at shooting down propaganda, a group of journalists representing 20 Sudanese independent outlets formed the Sudan Media Forum. The leader of the initiative, Kamal Elsadig, who is also the editor of Radio Dabanga, a Sudanese news organization based in Amsterdam, described it as “an alliance to support and develop media and defend press freedoms, peace, and democracy and counter hate speech, misleading information, and disinformation.”

It’s a tall order. “Ninety percent of Sudanese me-

dia institutions have been damaged or completely destroyed,” the Sudanese Journalists Syndicate concluded in a report in April. The group recently said that 32 journalists have been killed since the beginning of the war and that many others have been assaulted, detained, tortured, or kidnapped. One victim was Sudan Bukra correspondent Halima Idris Salim, who was run over by an RSF vehicle while reporting on dire conditions at a hospital in the city of Omdurman. Another was freelance columnist Yahya Hamad Fadlallah, who was arrested for allegedly collaborating with the RSF and tortured and denied medical treatment. In October 2025, RSF fighters abducted and detained a stringer for Al Jazeera in El Fasher, Muammar Ibrahim, claiming in a social media video that it was investigating the journalist’s “biased” reporting.

Compounding their pain, Sudanese journalists say it often feels like nobody outside their country is watching. In April, 10 Sudanese reporters still in the country published a letter in the French daily *Le Monde*. They wrote: “We, Sudanese journalists, call for an international mobilization to support those who inform you from inside the country — at the risk of their lives — whether on the frontline or in forced exile.”

■ INTERNATIONAL MEDIA STRUGGLES

In the early days of the war, regional and international news organizations were forced to improvise like everybody else.

Many Arabic-language outlets had correspondents in Sudan, but most were holed up in a building in south Khartoum, where wide-angle shots of the city taken from the rooftop could capture only a small portion of the violence. Al Arabiya/Al Hadath hired AlMigdad Hassan, a pharmacist with some journalism training who happened to live in an area that other reporters could not reach. “Khartoum was chaotic in the early days of the war, and my first live broadcast was from a cellphone held by a friend,” he told me. “Without much experience in the beginning there was fear, but then I started to get enthusiastic about covering risky assignments.”

In November 2023, Al Jazeera Mubasher, the network’s C-SPAN-like channel, launched a daily hourlong program called “al-Harb al-Mansiya” (The Forgotten War) that included a daily summary of events and live discussions with politicians and commentators across

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CASUALTY OF WAR: SUDAN’S MEDIA EMERGENCY

A new report examines the country’s fragile media ecosystem, engulfed in a new wave of information warfare. BY MEERA SELVA

Sudan’s ongoing war has upended the country’s nascent and burgeoning digital media scene and created a chaotic, polarized information space. The Sudanese journalists who continue to report on the conflict, including the recent wave of killings in El Fasher, risk the most extreme consequences. The Committee to Protect Journalists has documented the killing of at least 14 journalists and media workers in Sudan since the conflict began in 2023, and hundreds more have been attacked, arrested, and forced to flee.

A new report prepared by academic researcher Aida Al-Kaisy for Internews Europe, with assistance from the Sudanese multilingual digital multimedia and research platform Andariya, describes how Sudan’s war has created a new wave of information warfare, where the warring parties attack journalists and create their own propaganda, using social media to divide citizens.

The conflict has triggered mass displacement of media professionals. Print newspapers vanished almost overnight as their Khartoum headquarters became inaccessible, while most television and radio stations were either closed, demolished, or transformed into propaganda tools. The majority of experienced journalists have been displaced or forced into exile across neighboring African countries, the Persian Gulf, Europe, and beyond. This collapse has created a severe skills gap in who can produce professional content.

Sudan’s media landscape has turned into a “parallel battlefield,” with information warfare operating

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A reporter affiliated with an Internews partner publication reviews audio files during a 2015 trip to Sudan. Since the start of the civil war in 2023, Sudanese journalists have been killed, displaced, threatened, and discredited by disinformation campaigns as the media ecosystem collapses.



COURTESY OF INTERNEWS

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the Sudanese political spectrum. Anchor Ahmed Taha, an Egyptian, has become a favorite among Sudanese viewers for his willingness to challenge his guests with difficult questions. In a typical post, one X user said: “People in Sudan watch Ahmed Taha in clubs like they’re watching soccer.”

As for global media outlets, several with Arabic-language divisions managed to provide some coverage. DW Arabic launched al-Sudan al-An — (Sudan Now) — in 2023, and BBC News Arabic dedicated an emergency shortwave radio service to news about Sudan.

Foreign journalists had few options for entering Sudan. One possibility was to cross the border from Chad into territory held by the RSF, but heavy fighting usually made that too dangerous. Many more attempted to enter through Port Sudan, which was controlled by the army, only to be denied visas.

That gave Yousra Elbagir, a Sky News correspondent based in Johannesburg, what she called a “homecourt advantage” over her competitors. A citizen of both Britain and Sudan — and therefore free from the visa requirement — she became the first Western journalist to report from the ground for an English language media outlet. She got in through Port Sudan and persuaded

military authorities to let in her team as well. She had already covered the evacuations of foreign nationals from Sudan to Djibouti and on to Jeddah, where she unexpectedly ran into her uncle and hugged him during a live broadcast. From inside Sudan, she embedded with the army and recorded footage of the destruction of the old Omdurman souq and reported from her family’s ransacked house.

Other outlets tried to keep up with Elbagir, but in truth, hopes that Sudan would finally receive the attention it deserved were doomed nearly six months into the war with the Oct. 7 Hamas attack on Israel. In the fall of 2023, coverage of Sudan dipped significantly. “The ‘forgetting’ of Sudan is less about oversight and more about hierarchies of visibility in global and regional media ecosystems,” said Hussein AlAhmad, an assistant professor of media and communication at the Arab American University in Ramallah and an expert on media coverage in the Arab world. “In terms of news value, unlike Ukraine or Gaza, Sudan exists in a liminal space.”

That December, Sudan experts Alex de Waal and Abdul Mohammed published an opinion piece in The New York Times with the headline: “The War the World Forgot.” It lamented the poor media coverage of Sudan

and argued that the United States risked becoming a silent witness to genocide.

Three months later, in March 2024, the Sudanese army regained control of the Sudan Radio and Television offices in Omdurman and began granting more visas to foreign journalists. They included reporters from BBC News Arabic, The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, PBS News, CBS, and The Atlantic.

Embedding with the military became the surest way for journalists to travel in Sudan. It wasn’t ideal, since the military controlled what reporters could see. But at least the outside world was paying more attention. Many of those trips were arranged by Lt. Col. Hassan Ibrahim, who handled foreign media requests for the army. He was killed in an RSF drone strike in March along with another military reporter and four Sudan TV crew members as the army was retaking the presidential palace. “Col. Hassan was a kind, vibrant man who loved Sudan & kept us safe while reporting,” Leila Molana-Allen, a correspondent for the “PBS News Hour,” posted on X.

Coverage by U.S. public media outlets has suffered since the Trump administration and Congress cut funding. In March, two journalists from Voice

of America who had just spent two weeks reporting in Sudan received notices that they were being put on administrative leave, because the Department of Government Efficiency was dismantling the U.S. Agency for Global Media, which includes the network. “We have this rich material and can’t use it now,” one of the journalists told me. The elimination of the agency also ended funding for Bayn Nilein, or “Between Two Niles,” a weekly program about Sudan that aired on Alhurra, which is owned by the U.S.-based Middle East Broadcasting Networks.

Since leaving Khartoum, I have followed events and media coverage closely. I’ve written about the war and spoken on panels about it in hopes that more people will learn what is happening. Despite the efforts of Sudanese journalists working against enormous odds, there remains much to report on. “I think only 10% of this war has been covered,” Mohamed Eltayeb, a Sudanese journalist who has worked for various Arabic satellite TV stations, told me.

It all makes me wonder: If one of the greatest humanitarian crises ever recorded doesn’t warrant robust media coverage, well beyond what local reporters can provide, what does? ■

“The ‘forgetting’ of Sudan is less about oversight and more about hierarchies of visibility in global and regional media ecosystems” — Hussein AlAhmad, assistant professor of media at the Arab American University in Ramallah

CASUALTY OF WAR

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alongside the physical conflict. As journalists have fled, we have seen new sorts of content being produced by people outside professional norms and regulatory frameworks. Both the Sudanese Armed Forces and Rapid Support Forces, the major antagonists in the war, play a role in enabling this situation. The role of the United Arab Emirates in the manipulation of information in Sudan must also not be underestimated. Both warring parties have weaponized media as part of their conflict strategy, viewing independent journalism as fundamentally threatening to their narrative. Journalists have been killed, systematically harassed, and arbitrarily detained.

Sudanese women journalists endure a higher danger of attack. The targeting of women is often deliberate and premeditated, and gender-based violence is used as a specific weapon against women in media.

Human rights monitors and reporters, including those supported by Internews, have been singled out by both warring parties. These individuals face harassment, intimidation, and violence as they work to document abuses and provide accurate information.

Citizens are not getting the information they need. This conflict has been marked by a deliberate targeting of hospitals, schools and essential services, and as the media

are unable to function, people cannot access the essential, immediate information they must have to survive.

In the absence of reliable traditional media, Sudanese citizens have turned overwhelmingly to social media platforms — particularly Facebook, WhatsApp, and TikTok — as primary information sources. This shift has intersected with systematic information manipulation and disinformation campaigns alongside the emergence of unregulated “citizen journalists” who often lack professional training but can wield significant influence. The result is an information environment characterized by alternative facts, misleading narratives, and hate speech, all of which continue to further entrench divisions and conflict.

Video manipulation and artificial intelligence have become weapons in this war, with deepfakes of key political figures sowing discord and confusion. Even in cases like the El Fasher massacre, fake images are spread when horrifying, genuine photos already exist.

The collapse of state institutions means traditional regulatory frameworks and legal protections no longer exist. At the same time, all of society is militarized, with no acceptance of the concept of journalistic impartiality. The war itself is sustained by information manipulation, including false promises of quick victory.

Groups that are already marginalized — women, displaced persons, people with disabilities, and rural populations — have been hardest hit. They are systematically excluded from vital information they need to survive. Internet connectivity remains poor or entirely absent in many areas, while those with access can often receive only content controlled by military entities. This digital divide has created information bubbles that reinforce geographic and social fragmentation. Community radio stations play a role in providing localized information in some regions, although they also struggle with connectivity and limited resources.

There is still innovation out there. Journalists operating in exile have created new outlets and platforms that can counter hate speech while maintaining professional standards. However, these initiatives face significant sustainability challenges, operating largely through international donor support and volunteer efforts while lacking the resources and protection mechanisms necessary for long-term viability.

Journalists and those who support journalism must stand in solidarity with Sudanese journalists right now. They need support to relocate to safe spaces, and they need digital security, legal support, and to be part

of professional networks in their new communities, whether they are inside Sudan or outside.

The new storytellers filling the information gaps created by the collapse of the media sector in Sudan also need support to maintain editorial standards and do effective conflict reporting and verification. They must understand their audience’s needs and perspectives.

In the future, Sudan will have to rebuild its regulatory and legal environment for the media. Networks like the Sudanese Journalists Syndicate and the Sudan Media Forum can provide a useful starting point for discussions over what will be needed to make Sudan’s media viable and relevant again. Sudan’s war comes as donors worldwide are cutting budgets and withdrawing from global development, but independent journalism will be critical for civilian survival, accountability, and eventual democratic transition. Given Sudan’s substantial influence across the region, this cannot be avoided. Independent media needs funding, and strategies must include efficiency-maximizing solutions, innovative funding strategies, and a focus on sustainability. ■

Meera Selva is the CEO of Internews Europe, a media support nonprofit working in more than 50 countries.

MYANMAR'S INDEPENDENT MEDIA INNOVATES TO SURVIVE

As U.S. funding
vanishes, competitors
turn collaborators to
keep reporting alive

BY LORCAN LOVETT

PHOTOS BY VALERIA MONGELLI



THE SWIFT LOSS OF U.S. FUNDING for global media since President Donald Trump took office a year ago has devastated journalism in many countries where the independent press was already on precarious footing.

This rollback of press freedom programs, as well as the loss of some funding from European nations refocused on security closer to home, has left exiled media outlets from Myanmar, Belarus, Afghanistan, South Sudan, and other countries that lack a free press facing the same question: When decades-long donors pull out, what comes next?

In a country like Myanmar, where journalists have been systematically targeted by the country's military regime, the question is a matter of extreme urgency.

Myanmar now ranks among the world's top three jailers of media workers, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, alongside China and Israel.

Since overthrowing the elected government in 2021, the regime has jailed 223 journalists, free speech group Athan says. At least 12 have been killed, and many tortured. The junta — while holding what international observers widely condemned as sham elections from late December 2025 through January 2026 — has continued to systematically commit atrocities.

The military has also launched a series of offensives to reclaim urban areas — moves analysts say are aimed at projecting control in an effort to legitimize the vote — while revolutionary forces have dug in, vowing to disrupt the junta's plans.

Despite an urgent need for comprehensive, independent coverage of these developments, the funding that sustained many media outlets in exile has been decimated, and the country's most reputable media organizations, also operating largely in exile, have lost two of their biggest donors: the United States and Sweden. With up to 80% of their funding once coming from foreign sources, according to one outlet's estimate, the pullback has forced a dramatic shift in strategy.

Inside Myanmar, independent journalism has been largely extinguished in areas under regime control, where domestic news outlets function as instruments

of state propaganda. Only in opposition-held territory do reporters retain any meaningful space to challenge the junta's rule.

A NEW PROBLEM, A SEARCH FOR SOLUTIONS

WITH AN AUTOCRATIC REGIME they oppose in control of the country's economy, Myanmar's independent media organizations have been desperately searching for new income sources. Domestic businesses are unlikely to advertise on their sites, as they would risk the regime's ire. The situation is causing additional insecurity for exiled journalists, who are already grappling with financial stressors, separation from their families (many of whom still face danger back home), and precarious legal statuses that can mean a risk of arrest in the neighboring countries where they have taken refuge.

In response, Myanmar's large competing media outlets have taken measures that might have been unthinkable in years past: from forming an alliance to apply for funding, to establishing a "hot line" to share information on donors, collaborate on investigations, and tackle issues like website security. Several outlets report that cyberattacks have surged recently, with many traceable to IP addresses in Russia and China — both close allies of the regime. Outlets have shared content, and three have launched a joint readership



PREVIOUS PAGE: Mork Hom, a radio announcer for the Shan Herald Agency for News, works in the outlet's studio in Chiang Mai, Thailand — the de facto hub for Myanmar's independent media in exile. Funding cuts, including the loss of USAID-backed financial support, have forced these outlets to slash salaries, return grants, or shut down altogether.

donation drive. One even lent studio space to another.

"We can't just cry out for not having funds," said Aye Chan Naing, executive director of the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), adding, "It's a tricky balance. ... If donors spread their funds to everybody, nobody will be able to survive."

This push toward realignment is playing out in a complex media environment. Just as many of those waging revolution have a desire to unseat not only the military, but also the entrenched power structure of the Bamar — the ethnic majority at the center of political control in Myanmar — the media sector echoes these tensions. With the Bamar leading Myanmar's largest news organizations — most of which are in exile — some fear that efforts toward closer collaboration among the organizations could lead to a diminished role for smaller media outlets, many of which serve the country's ethnic minorities.

Despite these reservations, Myanmar offers an interesting lesson in how media organizations are trying to persevere as they navigate a post-foreign funded world, forcing the kinds of creative solutions and new ways of thinking that could lead to interesting outcomes.

MYANMAR'S MEDIA UNDER SIEGE

AN ESTIMATED 64 OF 73 independent Myanmar media organizations operate from exile — many based in neighboring northern Thailand's Chiang Mai city, the de

facto hub for Myanmar diaspora journalism.

According to a media development source who requested anonymity in order to protect staff and affiliated journalists working inside Myanmar, it would cost an estimated \$8 million to \$10 million annually to fund basic operations for about 50 of these outlets and keep the media running for the country's 55 million people — a sum he called "peanuts."

Foreign funding covered 40% to 50% of those costs in 2024; now it covers less than 25%.

"If that money gets smaller, people will live in the dark," he said.

The lights started going out for many news organizations in March 2025, when the Trump administration cut funding for Voice of America and Radio Free Asia, which ran Burmese-language services that bypassed junta censorship. Regime leader Min Aung Hlaing publicly thanked Trump for making the cuts, as part of a letter that also requested a reduction in a tariff of 40% on Myanmar exports to the U.S. In the letter, he characterized the funding cuts to media as necessary for "regulating broadcasting agencies and funds" that spread "one-sided misinformation and distorted narratives," claiming the outlets had exacerbated conflicts in Myanmar and influenced the U.S. to impose sanctions on the junta.

The Trump administration's cancellation of most of the contracts for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) affected oth-

Journalists work in the Democratic Voice of Burma newsroom in Chiang Mai, Thailand. As longtime donors pull out, Myanmar's once-competing news organizations have formed alliances to seek funding and keep reporting from exile, offering lessons in how media organizations can navigate a world without foreign funding.



Sai Kham Phu, managing director of the Shan Herald Agency for News in Chiang Mai, warns that alliances led by Bamar-majority organizations risk marginalizing ethnic-minority media. He says donors must avoid reinforcing “Burmanization” — the imposition of Bamar culture and language on Myanmar’s ethnic minorities at the expense of their own identities.

er media funders as well. Media development partner Internews had been set to expand its support of Myanmar media following the coup. It had gained approval for a \$4 million, one-year extension to an \$18 million contract that began in August 2020, aimed at helping “sustain access to information for the people of Burma in a critical time of increased vulnerability.” But the USAID cuts blocked a key source of funding for Internews, cutting off a large portion of the organization’s budget and forcing it to ask several Myanmar outlets to return part of the money it had already distributed. Concerned that failing to do so could jeopardize future funding, DVB said it returned nearly \$14,000, most of it earmarked for freelance filmmakers. Other outlets were forced to stop paying salaries or cease operations entirely.

The drastic scaling back or closure of local outlets can have a ripple effect, because national and international media — including wire services that disseminate information across the globe — often rely on them for coverage.

Compounding the crisis of media funding cuts, Sweden announced in September that it would be ending development aid to Myanmar in 2026 — a loss of \$2.4 million annually, according to Human Rights Myanmar — as part of a wider strategy to shift its financial support to Ukraine.

FORMING AN ALLIANCE

THERE ARE SOME POTENTIAL BRIGHT SPOTS, however. In several instances, the funding crisis has turned competitors into collaborators. Five major outlets — DVB, The Irrawaddy, Myanmar Now, Mizzima, and Burma News International (a consortium representing 14 ethnic outlets) — all operating in exile, have found creative ways to address the challenges.

Although long considered rivals, many of Myanmar’s media outlets have entwined personal histories and shared bonds that have been forged throughout their country’s many upheavals. Several outlet founders and editors have been political prisoners; some resisted the junta together after a 1988 pro-democracy uprising. Myanmar Now’s co-founder Swe Win, who once worked with Irrawaddy founder and editor Aung Zaw, was shot in an attack allegedly linked to the military before relocating into exile. It’s because of these shared histories, Aung Zaw said, that they can all “relate to each other.”

After funding was thrown into jeopardy, coordination between news outlets tightened. Several organizations signed a February 2025 joint memorandum calling for greater transparency in how donor funds were being spent, including a more detailed accounting of fees paid to unnamed media-development intermediaries — international nonprofits that administer donor grants, set budgeting and progress-report requirements, and pro-

vide training and technical support to local newsrooms. Editors said they wanted to see dwindling donor funds used as efficiently as possible. The memo also urged donors to provide ongoing, longer-term support for core operational costs, and to help outlets build revenue streams, rather than only offer project-specific grants.

“We have become more collaborative and have a more common voice,” Aung Zaw said. “Coordination is the way forward for media houses here.”

The five allied outlets also have applied together for European Commission funding, and have toured European capitals trying to drum up support despite the fact that, as DVB Executive Director Aye Chan Naing said, “everybody all over the world is going after European funding.”

The editors have tried to make the case that funding independent media in Myanmar is in Europe’s best interest, and that to challenge the regime is to challenge Russian influence in Southeast Asia. The junta counts Russia among its closest allies. Moscow supplies it with arms, technical training, and diplomatic cover, while the junta reciprocates with Myanmar-made mortar rounds, which have been used in the fight against Ukraine.

In addition to Russia, Myanmar’s junta-organized election had the backing of Belarus, China, and other allies. With opposition parties banned and only military-approved candidates on the ballot, Western governments called the election an attempt by junta chief Min Aung Hlaing to cement his grip on power. As widely expected, the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party, led by former generals, emerged as the winner. The military-drafted constitution also reserves 25% of parliamentary seats for soldiers, effectively ensuring control by the armed forces and allied parties. Even before final election results were announced, Min

Aung Hlaing had signed a law helping him retain influence without formally leading the new government.

Exiled Myanmar media outlets still covered the election, deploying reporters — often at grave personal risk — inside both regime- and rebel-controlled areas. Cooperation among outlets in the field is informal, and does not involve newsroom supervision. Instead, reporters from different outlets often trade tips and verify scraps of information. With their outlets’ licenses having been revoked by the regime, journalists covering events from junta-held cities continue to risk arrest or worse.

FALTERING REVENUE STREAMS

BEFORE THE COUP, OUTLETS HAD already been trying to wean off donor funds by pursuing other revenue streams, including advertising on their news websites and social media. Broadcasters like DVB, which operates its own TV channel, also brought in income through video advertising.

Like many of its rivals, DVB has considerable reach — more than 3 million YouTube subscribers and 21 million Facebook followers. Aye Chan Naing said that in 2020, just before the coup, the company’s self-raised revenue reached 50%, with a goal of full self-reliance by 2025. That revenue plunged to almost zero after the coup.

Many editors also saw local advertisers abandon independent media following the coup, fearing reprisals from the junta. Platforms such as YouTube and Facebook embed advertisements into content, and share a percentage of revenue with publishers. In countries like Myanmar however — where, for example, Aye Chan Naing estimates over 80% of his outlet’s audience



Shwun Theingi Aung is a TV presenter for Dawei Watch in Chiang Mai. Dawei Watch reports on Myanmar’s southern Tanintharyi region and covers minority communities often overlooked by national media.

is inside the country — views earn almost nothing, because advertisers pay far less to show ads to people with low incomes and in countries where sanctions complicate financial transactions.

Paid subscriptions aren't a dependable revenue source either. Even with cash, transferring any type of funds for donations or subscriptions from inside Myanmar is risky, as the regime often tracks financial transactions. And viewers who might encounter a pay-wall on DVB's site, for example, can find similar stories for free on rival sites like The Irrawaddy, in practice denying DVB subscription revenue. Aye Chan Naing said this underscores why collaboration, rather than competition, may be a more sustainable financial model in the long run.

Meanwhile, crowdfunding amongst the diaspora increasingly means that media outlets are competing with other groups soliciting money to help the more than 3.6 million displaced people inside the country and civil servants who refuse to work under the junta and who "need the money more," Aye Chan Naing added.

Tin Tin Nyo, the managing director of BNI, said that after the coup, "the whole media business collapsed." Now, she added, if the remaining independent media outlets disappear, junta propaganda will quickly fill the vacuum. "They can manipulate and brainwash the people," she said.

SMALLER OUTLETS FACE ADDITIONAL OBSTACLES

SAI KHAM PHU, THE MANAGING DIRECTOR of the Shan Herald Agency for News (SHAN), said the recent push for collaboration between outlets is being led largely by Bamar-dominated organizations. Sai Kham Phu, who is Shan — one of Myanmar's largest ethnic minority groups, largely concentrated in the country's hilly eastern area along the borders with Thailand, China, and Laos — said this poses a potential problem with the collaboration, as dismantling Bamar power structures is a big issue in the current civil war sparked by the coup. He added that donors must understand the dangers of supporting "Burmanization" — a term used to describe the imposition of Bamar culture and language on Myanmar's ethnic minorities at the expense of their own identities.

"Aren't we fighting for equality and federal democracy?" Sai Kham Phu said. "Are we hypocrites? Donors should see there are many layers, and think about equality and equity, otherwise you support Burmanization."

SHAN, a Burma News International member, has a membership program that accounts for 5% of its budget; the rest is funded by donors. It has already had to cut its freelance budget and money for events, but Sai Kham Phu views staff layoffs as a last resort.

"We can't send them back, we have an obligation to protect them," he said, adding that most of SHAN's staff members are under 30 years old, and laying them off would subject them to possible military conscription back home.

It's not only smaller, ethnic-minority outlets that

are worried about donors favoring collaboration among larger outlets. Hmue Eain Zaw, an ethnic Bamar editor of New Day Myanmar, said smaller outlets like his support an important ecosystem for developing talent, and often break stories before national and international outlets amplify them.

"All of those new entries will be jobless. It's like cutting out a generation of journalists," he said. "We're the foundation of the industry."

Detained for a week in September 2021, Hmue Eain Zaw recalled fleeing to Thailand after the regime threatened to kill him if he continued reporting. Now, forced to slash salaries, he runs his outlet with three volunteers who work side jobs in meal preparation and delivery just to get by.

Thu Rein Hlaing, managing editor of Dawei Watch, runs a team of 10 covering the southern Tanintharyi region, part of Myanmar's rich landscape of multiple ethnicities and identities that shape the need for localized outlets.

SHAN reports in the Shan language, for example, as well as English and Burmese. Outlets that cover the Karen, who account for about 7% of the population, know the complex networks of Karen armed groups best. Thu Rein Hlaing conducts interviews in the local Tavoyan dialect.

"If you interview in Burmese, the interviewee might not talk about everything. Using the mother tongue makes it more familiar," he said.

Though "in theory [collaboration] is quite worrying," Thu Rein Hlaing said he'd welcome national outlets outsourcing investigations at the local level, as well as sharing resources, "if it's done fairly."

"Sometimes it's not about big or small; it's about specialization," he said.

BNI's leaders try to counter fears of Bamar dominance by emphasizing that they publish in 10 languages and reach 14 million readers. News organizations such as The Irrawaddy assert they also reflect Myanmar's diversity and sympathize with smaller outfits, which they would not "neglect or ignore," according to Aung Zaw.

But there's only so much the larger outlets can do as they weather their own storms. U.S. cuts wiped out 35% of The Irrawaddy's budget. It took cuts less than that to force the Tachileik News Agency to shut down. BNI, which lost 20% in U.S. funding, had to cancel some radio programming and is trying to help other hard-hit members survive through year's end.

"For 2026, everything is uncertain," Tin Tin Nyo, BNI's managing director, said. "I'll keep advocating to other big media to think how we can help other media. But since we can barely survive ourselves, how can we help?"

THE DONOR PERSPECTIVE

THOMAS BÄRTHLEIN, PROJECT MANAGER FOR DW Akademie, the arm of Germany's public broadcaster Deutsche Welle that trains and supports journalists worldwide, says Myanmar's exiled independent media is "a unique case that deserves special support," because



the country's people rely so heavily on it. DW Akademie gives a high proportion of its funding directly to local media outlets, mostly to help fund salaries, according to Bärthlein.

While excluding smaller outlets from collaborations isn't the solution in Bärthlein's eyes, some consolidation may help those that are too small to report in-depth on their own. "But it's very difficult for us to say how they should behave and work," he said. "We have a global challenge: People don't know how to fund media anymore."

Bärthlein believes that the best way forward lies in attracting more funding from democracies. Exiled media should also strengthen ties with their communities, he added, and make it clear to their audiences that "we are doing this for you, and you can be part of it."

The media development source, who had requested anonymity, likened the situation in Myanmar to Syria, where exiled and independent media shrank — after a short-lived burst of expansion around 2011 that dovetailed with a popular protests against the regime — from dozens of outlets to just a handful, amid funding shortfalls and the civil war. Such a drastic contraction of the media ecosystem, he said, can have consequences that go beyond people not being able to get news. The absence of fact-based reporting can disrupt humanitarian and developmental assistance networks that often rely on local reporting for operations and analysis. "It's a life-saving tool for many," he added.

A HISTORIC INFLECTION POINT

MOST EDITORS of Myanmar's independent media organizations agree this is the most serious funding crisis they've ever faced, and it's happening at a historic inflection point that could result either in decades more of dictatorship — or a crisis for the military that leads to an opportunity for change.

But the ongoing war, punctuated by regime atrocities, is already being severely underreported. If media funding collapses entirely, the conflict risks disappearing from the historical record.

Myanmar journalists, long accustomed to threats and persecution, are determined to keep going.

"It's a testing period for all of us," Aung Zaw said, adding that he, like many others, has struggled hard for a decade, holding several jobs in order to keep doing journalism. "We've been through it."

His publication has endured previous storms, from periodic funding droughts since its founding in 1993, to navigating the transition from print to digital while surviving censorship bans under prior regimes — including a period when people caught in Myanmar with a copy of the magazine faced arrest. But they keep going.

"The regime is already gleefully waiting for our collapse," Aung Zaw said. "But we won't collapse. We will continue." ■

Tin Tin Nyo, managing director of Burma News International — a consortium representing 14 ethnic media outlets — outside a temple in Chiang Mai. BNI has lost a significant share of its U.S. support, forcing cancellation of its radio programming and underscoring the fragility of an independent media ecosystem that, Nyo says, risks being replaced by junta propaganda if it collapses.

JOURNALISM CO-OPS MAY SEEM UTOPIAN



**BUT WHAT
IS IT LIKE
WORKING
AT ONE?**

BY NEEL DHANESHA

Defector almost didn't exist.

The sports and culture website, created by a bunch of staffers who resigned from Deadspin in late 2019, seemed on the verge of launching the following year with backing from traditional sources of funding.

"We talked to all the venture capitalists in New York media, and we had some offers," said Jasper Wang, 38, Defector's vice president of revenue and operations.

But the pandemic changed Defector's course. New York City shut down, the economy ground to a halt, and the offers of capital dried up. Rather than give up, the group decided to launch a new website on its own dime, this time structured as a worker-owned cooperative in which the journalists, rather than media executives, made all the decisions.

The site became the kind of success that's rare in digital media nowadays, bringing in \$3.2 million in revenue from over 40,000 paying subscribers in its first year alone. It struck gold a second time in 2022 with the podcast Normal Gossip, which hit 100,000 downloads per episode just six months in, and now averages about half a million downloads per episode. And it inspired a wave of worker-owned outlets across the United States, covering science and gaming and local news from coast to coast.

PREVIOUS PAGE: The team at Coyote Media, a newly launched worker-owned outlet serving the San Francisco Bay Area. The collective launched in September 2025 and experiments with shared decision-making and community-centered reporting.

Worker-owned media cooperatives, or "co-ops," have existed for a long time; some, like Mexican daily newspaper La Jornada, are decades old. But the surge of digital co-ops in the U.S. — at least 18 have launched in the last five years — is a sign of the media times. As legacy and early-digital outlets shrink, shutter, get stripped for parts by private equity companies, or are transformed by the whims of billionaire owners, more journalists, tired of trying to find a port in the storm that may only provide a year or two of shelter, are building their own ships.

To some of those tired, overworked journalists, co-ops

may look almost utopian — promising the agency and creative freedom you get from a personal newsletter, but with added structure and, in some cases, editors, salaries, and health insurance. And they give journalists a say in the future of their company.

But how does the promise play out in practice? What is the everyday experience of working at a journalism co-op like — and how does that change depending on its size, scope, and location?

In the same way that it isn't fair to compare the experience of working for The New York Times to the experi-

PREVIOUS PAGE: ESTEFANY GONZALEZ/COYOTE MEDIA



MATT LIEBERGALL/HELL GATE

ence of working at a small local newspaper, Defector is unusual in its size, reach, and financial stability. What has worked there would not necessarily work at other places, as it readily admitted in its fifth annual report: "Starting any new venture is difficult, but the conditions that Defector launched under were practically easy mode compared to today's media environment."

"Being worker-owned and -operated is not a silver bullet for saving journalism or righting the wrongs of American capitalism," Wang wrote on the site's fifth anniversary, "but it is one of many pathways that could use real funding, so we can see how big a part of the solution it could potentially be."

Riley MacLeod, 44, a worker-owner at the gaming site Aftermath, said that he and his four colleagues, all of whom worked together at Kotaku (a former G/O Media brand, like Deadspin), have more freedom as a co-op. "I think our journalism is more honest," he said. "We're more able to say what we want to say."

At the same time, he said, the day-to-day isn't always as rosy as one might envision.

"One of the challenges of this space is that you have this vision of your perfect job: Finally, you're out of the

DECISIONS, DECISIONS

Before Hell Gate, the worker-owned news outlet about New York City, launched in 2022, its five founding members were "some combination of freshly unemployed and chronically underemployed," said Nick Pinto, 47, one of those founding members and a current reporter and co-owner at the publication.

"A recurring theme in our conversations throughout that period was, 'How ... hard can it be to just make the news?'" he said. "We had seen the ugly side of billionaire ownership, and of six layers of nonprofit management sitting on top of the newsroom."

But that doesn't mean they can just blow up all the traditional structures of a media company. "The speed of action required by a newsroom does not favor an extremely horizontal decision-making process," Pinto said. Partly on the advice of Defector's Wang and editor-in-chief Tom Ley, Hell Gate decided to retain some of the usual newsroom structures, particularly the split between editors and reporters. It designated two of its seven editorial staffers as editors who direct traffic and have the sort of authority that an editor in a conventional newsroom would have (they also make more money).

the humb of the traffic-obsessed boss, and you can do your big investigations," MacLeod said. "But the reality is that now you have all these other jobs that [other] people used to do, and now you have to do them too."

Hell Gate staffers gather in Brooklyn for their 2025 holiday party. The worker-owned newsroom was founded by journalists disillusioned with traditional media ownership. "We had seen the ugly side of billionaire ownership, and of six layers of nonprofit management sitting on top of the newsroom," said Hell Gate co-founder Nick Pinto.

“ALL OF THE CLICHÉS ABOUT MOVEMENT ORGANIZING ARE TRUE. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO HERD A BUNCH OF CATS INTO ALL RUNNING THE SAME DIRECTION? THERE ARE ONLY SO MANY MODELS OF THAT. AND THEY ALL INVOLVE A LOT OF MEETINGS.”

NICK PINTO, REPORTER AND CO-FOUNDER OF HELL GATE

Defector, with its 27-person staff, breaks its editors and writers into pods of three or four, and the pods each have pitch and edit processes (as do Defector’s podcasts). Staff are paid a base salary of \$70,000 annually, with higher target salaries paid out quarterly from profits. Those target salaries are shifting; while there was originally a salary gap between writers and editors, the Defector staff voted to equalize target salaries over time so that writers didn’t have to become editors in order to get a raise. (Wang and Ley, given their leadership positions, will continue to be paid a higher salary, and podcast hosts benefit from a profit-sharing agreement based on their shows’ ad sales.)

None of the four worker-owners at Sequencer, a science publication, work there full time; they either have day jobs or primarily freelance. “If you think of us as four Venn diagrams,” said Maddie Bender, 28, one of the cofounders, “Sequencer is that overlap right in the middle where we can get back to our roots and do stuff that don’t fit with our day jobs.” They take turns writing and editing each other’s work for both the website and the weekly newsletter — something they used to do for each other at the now-shuttered digital publication Massive Science, where they met. Aftermath also has no dedicated editors, though MacLeod, who was the managing editor at Kotaku, said he’s accidentally fallen into a somewhat similar

role at Aftermath. (He described this as “a little bit of a bummer.”)

In addition to the day-to-day work, everyone at a co-op plays some part in deciding the future of their publication. When Coyote, a local news co-op in the San Francisco Bay Area launched last fall, “I didn’t take seriously enough the task of deciding how to decide,” said founding member Soleil Ho, 39. The Coyote team decided any decision that impacts every team member’s work will require a supermajority to agree to it. Other decisions may be decided by a simple majority.

Range, a co-op in Spokane, Washington, is part of a parent cooperative called the Spokane Workers Cooperative, which also includes a bakery and a branding and design studio — all of which are cooperatives themselves. Day-to-day editorial decisions remain in the hands of Range’s five-person team, but an oversight board is responsible for decisions that would affect every business in the parent co-op, such as acquiring another business or applying for large loans.

“We want to devolve power to the people who are closest to the problem and its potential solution,” said Luke Baumgarten, 45, founder and publisher of Range and one of the members of the Spokane Workers Cooperative’s oversight board. “We try to do our best to treat the folks on those teams as experts and let them cook.”

At Defector, every staff member serves on a committee — dedicated to company culture, revenue, or events, for example — that meets regularly. (The managerial board has two permanent seats for Ley and Wang, while three rotating seats are filled by election.) Especially big decisions, like firing a staff member or the company taking on a loan greater than \$50,000, are subject to an all-staff vote that requires a two-thirds majority to pass.

This does, however, mean that an already busy journalist might end up having a lot more meetings on their calendar if they work at a co-op. “Running an organization is a lot of work, especially if you have any level of commitment to horizontal governance,” Pinto said. “All of the clichés about movement organizing are true. What does it mean to herd a bunch of cats into all running the same direction? There are only so many models of that. And they all involve a lot of meetings.”

Giving workers decision-making power changes the kinds of pressure bearing down on an editor-in-chief, said Ley, 37. At publications like Deadspin, Ley got pressure from all kinds of people outside the editorial department — ad executives, sales departments, CEOs, board members — whose primary motivation was, in essence, to make traffic numbers go up. Ley would then have to translate those demands to his staff, even if he didn’t agree with them.

“The application of pressure is somewhat reversed now,” Ley said. “Here, I’m only responsible to the staff.”

If Ley’s colleagues think he or Wang is doing a really terrible job, they can call a vote to replace them. The flip side of that kind of agency and lack of management pressure, Ley pointed out, is that it means the team as a whole has to be more self-motivated for the business to succeed.

“It’s not for everyone,” Rachele Hampton, 29, the



The five worker-owners behind Aftermath, from left: Luke Plunkett, Riley MacLeod, Chris Person, and Gita Jackson. The reader-supported gaming site was launched by former Kotaku journalists in 2023.

current host of Defector’s Normal Gossip, told me. “I’m a process-ass bitch. I love structure. If I was less self-directed, I’d probably be freaking out.”

Humans and their relations

Even if you’re not freaking out, there are a lot of feelings involved. “This is the most fun I’ve had in a newsroom,” Jessy Edwards, 36, a worker-owner at Hell Gate, said. But “running your own news company while also being a reporter for it is no joke. It’s a bit like being in a band; there are all these personalities, and because we’re so small and we all have a vote, it’s important that we get along for the health of the company.” Coyote’s Ho made a similar point: “Very few of us have worked together before, and we’re all remote, so there’s so much potential for misinterpretation and conflict.” Said Wang: “I am constantly trying to minimize the aggregate amount of disgruntledness at the company.”

Historically, a major source of consternation at Defector has been that its worker-owners are anxious for feedback, in part because some worry about whether they’re pulling their weight. “In my first year, I had a lot of anxiety because I felt like I wasn’t producing enough and wasn’t being a good co-owner,” said Sabrina Imbler,

31, a science writer who came to Defector in 2022 after a fellowship on The New York Times’ science desk. (Disclosure: the author is friends with Imbler.) Imbler wasn’t the only one. Many of the former Deadspin staffers say they had been subjected to punishing quotas at that publication, and while none of them missed the quotas, they still found themselves looking for a healthier system of accountability.

So last year, Defector started experimenting with “feedback champions” — people who talk to each member of an editorial pod to collect feedback and then present it to each team member in a one-on-one meeting.

Even if some days are tiring, Edwards told me, she doesn’t feel the sort of existential tiredness she did when working at traditional news outlets, where she constantly feared that an edict from the top could kill a story she had worked on for months. “I may not agree with everyone on every decision,” she said, “but I do trust them to do the right thing. I trust their moral compasses.”

MONEY TALKS

A couple of years ago, the staff of Range received \$5 in the mail, slipped into an envelope without a note. Soon, it happened again.

Valerie Osier, Range’s managing editor, dug around and found that the money had come from a Range reader who had previously been unhoused but found a place to live after reading a Range guide to

“A LOT OF FOLKS HAVE REALLY STRUGGLED TO GET US ALL COLLECTIVELY TO THIS POINT. ... I AM HOPING THIS GETS EASIER AND MORE REPLICABLE AND HELPS UPEND THE CORPORATE TAKEOVER OF JOURNALISM IN THIS COUNTRY.”

SOLEIL HO, WRITER AND CO-FOUNDER OF COYOTE MEDIA COLLECTIVE

state resources. She couldn't afford a monthly or yearly contribution, she said, but she could throw money in an envelope when she had a little extra.

“It kind of knocked me flat when we found out,” Baumgarten told me. “It was a really emotional moment.”

Range uses a voluntary contribution model, and it has encountered bumps. Last summer, Baumgarten wrote on LinkedIn about having to lay himself off, though that move was temporary — a grant Range secured late in 2025 enabled him to come back full time. The grant will also allow Range to hire a Spanish-language reporter and a person dedicated to business operations.

There are a few other bumps in the road ahead. Range, and the Spokane Workers Cooperative more broadly, had to cut traditional health insurance last year, opting instead for a healthcare cooperative that provides good coverage for preventive care. “I actually think it's going to be a lot better for us than the traditional health plan would be, but that's all vibes right now,” Baumgarten said. “Ask me again next year.”

Defector has been profitable from its earliest days. The vast majority of its revenue — \$3.8 million in 2024-25 — comes from subscriptions, with the rest coming from a combination of podcast advertising, events, raffles and sales of merchandise, site sponsorships, and

streaming. Defector is also beginning to experiment with ads, which are now being shown to non-subscribers who come to the site.

Pinto acknowledged that while the vision at Hell Gate has always been to be primarily, if not exclusively, subscriber-funded — in part because of a “profound mistrust of the consistency of philanthropic interest” — the company has received support from a number of [philanthropic] donors that has helped them reach “something closer to a break-even point.”

While Hell Gate's 2025 annual report doesn't provide the same sort of detailed breakdown as Defector's, it brought in “nearly \$70,000” in monthly recurring revenue as of September, while it cost an average of \$81,000 per month to run the newsroom (monthly recurring revenue fluctuates with subscriber numbers, and Hell Gate made less than \$70,000 some months). The Hell Gate staff is mostly full-time, and Hell Gate fully funds their health insurance premiums; those costs, along with staff salaries, make up the majority of their expenses. Pinto told me that the outlet was profitable in 2025.

Hell Gate also sold about \$20,000 in ads in the last year, mostly for local businesses like a cleaning service where workers are compensated fairly and an off-Broadway play. “We have to get together before we sell an ad and ask how we feel about selling that ad,” Pinto said. “Are they aligned with what we're doing? Everything takes up a little bit of bandwidth.”

While the staff at Defector, Hell Gate, and Range are employed full time, that remains somewhat rare in the co-op world. A couple of years in, most of the worker-owners at Aftermath have side gigs that help make ends meet.

“It's really hard, but I try to remind myself that people start small businesses every day. So it's not something we can't figure out how to do,” MacLeod said. To teach himself business skills like bookkeeping, he's turned to resources like New York State's Small Business Development Center.

Sequencer uses its revenue from subscriptions (\$10,000 in 2025) to pay its writers and freelancers for any stories they write and to fund a mentorship program for budding science writers. But more than a year in, the primary thing it provides its staff with is an outlet that allows for complete creative freedom. “We're doing this not to make money, necessarily,” Sequencer's Bender said.

“People are really enthusiastic about this project in a way they weren't about my previous work,” said Coyote's Ho, who used to work at the San Francisco Chronicle. “I think I have a much less pained relationship with my readers now.”

The reader relationship changes in other ways, too. Co-op audiences tend to be both enthusiastic and forgiving; it's as if the journalists and readers are part of the same large circle of friends and acquaintances rather than people engaged in what is, at the end of the day, a financial transaction.

And the publications are more attuned to audience opinions. “Hell Gate sort of started as a vessel for the interests of its founding members,” Pinto said. “So every



time we contemplate any kind of editorial expansion, ... we go: ‘We're an ice cream stand. We've always sold ice cream. Do our readers even want anything else?’”

WHAT COMES NEXT

In July, Defector announced it had won a grant from the national funding coalition Press Forward. In coordination with Start.coop, a nonprofit co-op accelerator, it'll use that grant to build shared services — everything from self-service resources to bookkeepers whose time is split among multiple publications — for independent newsrooms. Wang, who spearheaded the grant application, also hopes to create a purchasing co-op to negotiate reduced prices on goods and services — whether website and platform fees or healthcare and office spaces.

“It feels like a good time to do something like that,” Ho said. “A lot of folks have really struggled to get us all collectively to this point. ... I am hoping this gets

easier and more replicable and helps upend the corporate takeover of journalism in this country.”

Range, which has seen some success with TikTok and Instagram Reels, plans to lean into those platforms, as well as putting on more in-person events — which Defector and Hell Gate also aim to do. Coyote, meanwhile, is planning to launch a classified section called Meet Cute Market later this year. Hell Gate in particular has a big year ahead: A grant from longtime media donor Ruth Ann Harnisch will cover two years of rent for a podcast studio and office space, which it intends to use for more livestreams and podcasts, and it also plans to expand its team.

In the end, what the media cooperatives are building may not look — to the average reader, at least — very different from all the publications that came before, and in many ways that is the entire point. The difference is in what practically every worker I spoke to mentioned: a workplace that puts its workers over profits.

“Hell Gate was born of a reaction to institutions that did not serve us or, we believed, our readers,” Pinto said. “To the extent that we are anti-institutional, we are trying to build an institution that can house that feeling in a lasting way. And that's just a different kind of work.”

“The idea,” he said, “is that this lives forever. As long as people want to work at Hell Gate, we want there to be a Hell Gate for them to work at.” ■

The Defector team poses alongside family and friends during an August 2025 company retreat in Ocean City, Maryland. Founded in 2020 by former Deadspin staffers, Defector is a worker-owned cooperative funded primarily by subscribers.

A version of this story first appeared in Nieman Lab.



FRANCE'S INDEPENDENT PRESS FIGHTS BACK

Alternative media startups see themselves as a bulwark against billionaires and the far right. Can they survive?

BY CHRISTOPHER CLARK

In his nearly 50-year career in French media, Jean-Michel Mariou has produced offbeat literary and cultural shows on public radio, directed regional operations for public television, and authored four books. But over the last decade, he has watched in distress as newspapers, radio stations, and television news channels across France have laid off reporters or simply gone out of business. In the Corbières region, the poor hinterland where Mariou lives, the main print daily, *L'indépendant*, has been in steep decline since its 2015 takeover by one of France's biggest regional conglomerates.

"The very notion of journalism is being flattened," Mariou said. "It can leave you feeling like you can't breathe."

And so last summer, at age 73, Mariou decided to do something about it. He and a graphic designer teamed up to create a local publication called *Le Matin des Corbières*. With a website that vows to "encourage civic debate," a proud leftist perspective, and plans for four print editions a year, it is staffed by five volunteers who hold their monthly editorial meeting at the bistro in the medieval village of Lagrasse, where most of them live.

The publication is part of a nationwide surge in alternative media startups. The exact numbers are difficult



PREVIOUS PAGE: Salomé Saqué, a journalist at the French outlet Blast, is part of a new generation of reporters who reject traditional notions of neutrality when covering the far right. Saqué says that journalists cannot treat “fascist excesses like any other news event.”

to pinpoint, but the most recent government tally, from 2021, identified 632 online-only news outlets, up from 391 in 2015. The Independent Online Press Union now represents 270 publishers, the vast majority of them having set up shop in the last decade.

Embracing France’s robust tradition of antiestablishment, left-leaning journalism, the new outlets tend to be overtly political, with an agenda meant to appeal to younger readers and counter the country’s dramatic shift to the right and the consolidation of traditional media under billionaire owners over the last 15 years.

Even though the startups represent a tiny portion of the media landscape, they have an outsized presence, having broken several big political stories that the mainstream media has been forced to follow.

Many of these new outlets are shoestring operations struggling to find a business model that can cover their costs. Financial failure is common, especially at the local level. But the successes have given idealists like Mariou enough hope to keep trying.

The first two print issues of *Le Matin des Corbières* — which included an in-depth report about a new housing project, a profile of young winemakers, a debunking of arguments that environmental policies led to recent wildfires, and an investigation into allegations that a local abbey had become a conduit for far-right ideas — each sold over 400 copies at 4 euros (around \$4.70) apiece. Along with revenue from about 100 digital “memberships,” Mariou said, that’s enough to keep the publication in business at least another six months.

“We know we’re going to have a very fragile economy,” he said. “But frankly, if you’re crazy enough to get involved in the local independent press today, you can’t just turn back.”

A NEW SECTOR EMERGES

France’s media ecosystem once revolved around well-funded public broadcasters and a constellation of heavyweight newspapers with clear ideological identities: *Libération* and *L’Humanité* on the left, *Le Figaro* on the right, and *Le Monde* in the center. But things began to change in the 1980s, when the opening of the country’s airwaves and the privatization of the national television channel TF1 ended the state’s near-monopoly on public broadcasting.

In 2005, the influential banker Édouard de Rothschild bought the newspaper *Libération*, whose founders were Jean-Paul Sartre and Serge July. That same year, Vincent Bolloré, a conservative Catholic billionaire with business interests spanning maritime shipping, global logistics, and commodities, launched a new TV channel called Direct 8. By 2007, Bolloré had added two daily newspapers and one of the world’s largest global communications groups to his holdings. It was the beginning of a buying spree that would eventually earn him comparisons to the Australian-born media mogul Rupert Murdoch and make him the dominant player in the club of 11 billionaires whose holdings account for 80% of France’s daily press sales and 57% of its television audience.

Bolloré has long portrayed himself as a defender of conservative values without claiming membership in any political party. But his media empire consistently depicts France as a country in decline and under threat because of unchecked immigration — echoing Marine Le Pen, leader of *Rassemblement National* (RN), the far-right party that has attracted global attention while becoming a leading competitor in French politics.

As Bolloré and other media barons have amassed power, public trust in the news has plummeted. Just 32% of the French public trusts reporting by the country’s news outlets on major current affairs today, compared with around half of respondents in the early 2000s, according to the long-running Verian-La Croix media trust barometer, though the wording of survey questions and indicators have evolved over time. Even as big outlets remain dominant, they have been shedding readers.

That has opened the way for the new generation of startups that the French commonly refer to in English as “pure players” to distinguish them from traditional media with a print or broadcast legacy.

The first of note was *Bondy Blog*, which was founded after the 2005 Paris banlieue riots to give voice to the marginalized residents of these long-neglected neighborhoods. It was soon followed by *Rue89*, which was founded by former *Libération* journalists and promised a press “revolution.”

The biggest step forward came in 2008 with the founding of *Mediapart*. Led by a former editor of *Le Monde*, it focused on political accountability and long-form investigative reporting rather than the churn of daily news — a strategy that many doubted could succeed financially.

But the gamble paid off. Today *Mediapart* has more than 245,000 subscribers and annual revenues of around 25 million euros (about \$30 million), making it one of the most financially successful digital newsrooms in Europe. Its reader-funded, advertising-free model has allowed it to retain a strongly independent editorial line.

The site has also become a key player in setting France’s national news agenda, exposing some of the country’s most consequential political scandals. Notably, it was the first to report several key aspects of the so-called Bettencourt Affair, publishing secret recordings that helped trigger judicial investigations into alleged illegal campaign financing and conflicts of

“Public awareness is growing, and people are increasingly ready to support independent journalism.”

Charlotte Clavreul, director of the Fund for a Free Press

MATHIEU GÉNON/REPORTERRE



interest involving senior figures close to then-President Nicolas Sarkozy.

“For a long time, mainstream media never cited online independent media. It was almost seen as not real journalism, and it was viewed with a lot of skepticism,” said Nikos Smyrnaiois, a media researcher at the University of Toulouse. “But through their investigations and their huge number of scoops, *Mediapart* has managed to legitimize this kind of independent reporting.”

By the standards of French media, *Mediapart* enjoys high levels of public trust. In a 2025 survey by the Reuters Institute, 47% of respondents who recognized *Mediapart* said they trusted the information it provides.

In 2019, the founders of *Mediapart* started the nonprofit Fund for a Free Press, which has provided financial support to nearly 50 other independent outlets. This past October, eight independent outlets also banded together to offer a joint subscription through a shared platform, *La Presse Libre*, which was supported by the fund to help expand their reach and revenue.

Nobody has been able to replicate the success of *Mediapart*, but many are trying. Among the most recent entrants in a crowded field is a Christian magazine called *Le Cri*, which hit newsstands this past October with an initial print run of 20,000 and an openly anti-right editorial line.

“There is real momentum,” said Charlotte Clavreul, director of the Fund for a Free Press. “Public awareness

is growing, and people are increasingly ready to support independent journalism.”

APPEALING TO A NEW GENERATION

In many ways, the new French outlets resemble the alternative weeklies that once thrived in the United States: left-leaning publications that eschew a sober, institutional tone for personality and passionate argument. Popular sites including *Streetpress*, *Basta!*, and *La Déferlante* often embrace the language of activism: anti-fascist, resistance, intersectionality, and feminist revolution.

Smyrnaiois said traditional journalistic values of objectivity and neutrality carry little weight with people under 35. “They prefer media that take a strong position, notably on questions like inequality, sexuality and gender, ecology, and social justice,” he said. “Because, if you like, their era calls for it.”

Nathan Delaunay, a 25-year-old winemaker in Lagrasse, said independent outlets seem “less corrupted than the big, traditional media” and that their reporting strikes him as “more factual and more reliable, and less filtered through political interpretations.”

Many of the new media organizations portray themselves as bulwarks against the extreme right. In the run-up to 2024 legislative elections, with Le Pen’s party expected to achieve major gains if not outright victory, more than 90 news organizations released a state-

Veteran journalist Jean-Michel Mariou outside his home in Lagrasse, France. Last summer, at age 73, in response to the decline of local media and the consolidation of national outlets, he launched an independent publication, *Le Matin des Corbières*, staffed by five volunteers. The outlet is part of a nationwide surge in alternative media startups.

ment warning: “Freedom of the press is in its sights. Throughout Europe and the world, it is under attack wherever the far-right rules.”

Le Pen’s party fell short of expectations, finishing third behind a leftist coalition and a centrist alliance led by President Emmanuel Macron. It’s difficult to say what impact the newer outlets had on the election, but there is no question they made an outsized contribution to the political debate. For example, several candidates from the RN withdrew from their races after Streetpress — a youth-focused investigative site that reaches as many as 6 million people a month — published a series documenting their racist statements, extremist affiliations, or opaque fundraising networks.

“We cannot say that this is just another political regime, just another political stance,” said Salomé Saqué, a journalist at Blast, a hybrid news site and web TV channel. “And we cannot say that as journalists we will just let this happen by treating fascist parties or fascist excesses like any other news event.” One of Blast’s anti-right videos during the campaign racked up more than 480,000 views on YouTube — viewership on par with or exceeding that of some mainstream outlets.

Saqué said the appeal of Blast also stems from its focus on inequality and attacks on mainstream media for catering to the well off. “I come from a very rural area in the Ardèche department,” she said. “Growing up, to me the media was something for rich people, for city folk. It seemed very, very far removed from my own life.”

One subscriber, Francis Derussy, a 41-year-old art installer, said he felt that he and the Blast employees “live in the same world, unlike the journalists and so-called experts we’re presented with on the radio and television every day.” He also lauded the site’s coverage of French territories, including his native Guadeloupe. “It’s completely different from what the big media and public broadcasting put out,” he said. “It gives you a bit of hope, even though the topics they tackle are anything but light.”

Alicia Even, a 22-year-old student from Nantes, said she appreciated Blast’s ability to combine rigorous journalism with a “dynamism and humor,” particularly on YouTube and social media, where she gets most of her news.

This solidarity between Blast’s audience and its newsroom is by design. Blast and many other independent outlets function as cooperatives in which employees and readers collectively hold shares, govern democratically and reinvest any profits in newsgathering.

ECONOMIC UNCERTAINTY

But like news operations around the world, the new outlets are struggling to find a business model that works in the digital age. Most are lucky to break even.

Blast has always relied heavily on donations, starting with the 2021 crowdfunding drive that launched it. That campaign raised 923,000 euros (about \$1,089,000) — a record for French media startups. Many of the journalists involved already had significant

“[Youth] prefer media that take a strong position, notably on questions like inequality ... and social justice. Their era calls for it.”

Nikos Smyrmaois, researcher at the University of Toulouse

followings online. “At the beginning, there were just eight of us, and we were working out of a little apartment in Paris,” said Saqué, who had made a name for herself with viral videos of the populist yellow vests protest movement. “We didn’t have any fixed premises, any money, or a studio, and everything was done completely on the fly.”

Today, Blast has an annual budget of at least 2 million euros (about \$2,365,300), around 40 employees, and starting salaries of about 34,000 euros (about \$40,000) a year. A YouTube following of 1.6 million brings in a small amount of revenue, but most comes from donations. While the articles are free to anybody, more than 32,500 people elect to chip in, mainly through subscriptions starting at 5 euros (around \$6) a month.

Another venture, Brief Media, which summarizes and explains the news in seven-minute daily digests, has built a profitable subscription model and recently diversified its revenue by selling its product to high schools for teaching purposes. But its founder, Laurent Mauriac, who is also co-president of the Independent Online Press Union, worries about other organizations finding sustainability. Growth of the sector has slowed in the last few years, with more projects failing to get off the ground. “I think the main challenge remains achieving profitability and then maintaining it,” he said. “Because, in fact, the problem with a lack of profitability is that it often results in a loss of independence.”

The economic challenge is especially difficult for local publications with their naturally smaller audiences. Industry experts said just one online-only local startup has managed to break even: an investigative outlet called Marsactu that covers Marseille. Launched in 2010, it quickly became known for its granular reporting on politics and business in France’s second-largest city. But by 2015, it was financially insolvent and heading toward liquidation — until hundreds of readers mobilized to help five of its journalists buy the site and rebuild it around a subscription-only model. By the end of 2020, it had 5,000 paid subscribers — enough to support its staff of around 10 and avoid taking state subsidies that have been a lifeline for other local publications.

That has given Marsactu independence to go after local power players, offering coverage that its co-editor-in-chief, Coralie Bonnefoy, said is missing from the media chain La Provence, which is owned by billionaire



shipping magnate Rodolphe Saadé and dominates the region. Still, the business is fragile. In 2024, Marsactu faced a defamation lawsuit — which was recently dismissed — for its investigations into the allegedly violent practices of a leading orthopedic surgeon. “Clearly, we know that a situation like this could spell the end for us,” Bonnefoy said.

Local and regional publications have one promising advantage over their national competitors: Readers trust them much more. Recent surveys from both the Reuters Institute and Verian found that about two-thirds of French readers had faith in their local media.

RURAL CONCERNS

Back in Lagrasse, Mariou is banking on that trust to grow his fledgling publication. His plan is to eventually cover the 30 towns and villages that make up the Corbières region.

Mariou insisted on a print edition, because paper and ink harken back to a time when the media and politics didn’t seem so distant to most people. The publication is now sold at a dozen newsstands, bookshops, and bakeries. Mariou also sells it at the Saturday market in Lagrasse, where he can appeal directly to potential readers.

Among those already won over is Pierre-Yves Rommelaere, a 45-year-old chef who lives in the village of St. Pierre des Champs. He lauded Le Matin des Corbières for reflecting his lived experience in a way

that feels “concrete” because local reporters are “rooted on the ground and familiar with the territory, its people, and its history.”

In December, Mariou was preparing to publish his third print edition, with a heavy focus on regional municipal elections set for March. The big story is still the far right. In a region where the Socialist Party had long dominated, Le Pen’s party has been gaining ground rapidly, with its average share of the regional vote jumping from around 29% in the 2022 legislative elections to around 47% in 2024.

A former Maoist, Mariou said he believed that extremists have gained traction in part because the collapse of local media has left an information vacuum. He started Le Matin des Corbières as a “newspaper of the struggle” against the rising influence of the right. “I don’t see us saying to people, ‘You should vote for this guy or that guy,’” Mariou said. “On the other hand, we are going to try to follow the progression of the Rassemblement National across this territory to try to understand it.”

He suggested that small papers could play a pivotal role in the election results in some small towns and villages. In Lagrasse, which has a population of around 550, his publication is already read widely enough to at least get significant numbers of people thinking about the issues and what’s at stake.

“When you look at political debate today, it is completely out of touch,” he said. “I believe that we as independent local media can help to address that.” ■

A scene from the documentary “Depuis Mediapart,” which follows the independent newsroom before, during, and after France’s 2017 presidential election. Built on a reader-funded, advertising-free model and a focus on long-form political accountability journalism, Mediapart has grown into one of Europe’s most financially successful digital newsrooms.

NARUNA KAPLAN DE MACEDO

EMPOWERING AIRWAVES

Women-led radio stations amplify unheard voices in communities around the world

BY GABE BULLARD

ILLUSTRATIONS BY NICOLE RIFKIN

On March 8, 2021, a new radio station launched in Kabul: Radio Begum, run by women, for women. The timing was deliberate — the station opened on International Women’s Day, and just as the United States military was withdrawing from Afghanistan.

“I decided to launch this radio station in order to be ready for the day the Taliban takes power,” said Hamida Aman, the station’s founder. “We knew that as soon as they take power, it will be segregation, and again, it will be against women.”

Five months later, the Taliban retook Kabul and imposed new laws restricting women’s access to schools and their movements in public. Five years later, Radio Begum is still on the air. The station follows the letter of the law, even as restrictions tighten. It doesn’t cover politics or any subjects that are off-limits for public discussion among women under Taliban edicts. Instead, it focuses on health, religion, and providing educational programs to replace the schooling women are now prohibited from receiving.



“They banned schools, but not education,” Aman said.

Begum may be unique in Afghanistan, but its model is in practice around the world. It is one of many women-run radio stations — from rural India to the Peruvian Amazon — that, although not part of a formal network, share many attributes and goals.

Some of these stations, like Begum, are oases of information in areas where women are restricted in what they can access. Others, in countries where the government is less restrictive, provide an antidote to male-dominated media that ignore issues that affect women. And still other stations challenge cultural barriers and break the silence around topics that are rarely if ever discussed. Whatever their mission and wherever their location, what the stations have in common is the amplification — literally and metaphorically — of women’s voices to create a community that might not otherwise exist, on-air or off.

Even as advancing technology has led to new independent media outlets and expanded ways of sharing and accessing information, radio remains a powerful medium for breaking barriers, broaching taboo subjects, and speaking directly to oppressed or obscured groups in society. The nonprofit that runs Begum, for example, also operates a TV station that broadcasts via satellite from France (where Aman is now based), and it has a smartphone platform as well. Because it’s not within Afghanistan’s borders, the television channel can be more open in its programming, but for Aman, radio will always have a place. “It’s cheap and everybody can have access,” she said.

Radio remains accessible and portable, even without an internet connection, electricity, or the ability to read. The fact that broadcasts generally come from a local tower gives radio a geographic connection that isn’t inherent to most other media. And through call-in programs, broadcasts aren’t limited to one-way conversations.

For Begum, this means women can — within the parameters of government restrictions — ask questions they may not be able to ask elsewhere, as the station’s programs center around life issues, and are interactive, Aman said. Listeners “can call us at any time, to talk with our doctors, to talk with our psychologists, to talk with our spiritual counselor to get information about religion,” she added.

Even when women don’t have specific questions, there’s value in hearing other women’s voices on these programs, according to Saba Chaman, who was the first director of Radio Begum and has worked for Begum TV since 2024. “It provides them with an opportunity to listen to other women, to listen to the way they talk, to listen to the way they start and finish their sentences,” Chaman said.

Operations haven’t been entirely smooth for Begum, however. In February 2025, Taliban officials alleging violations of the law raided the station, arrested two employees, confiscated hard drives, phones, and documents, and shut down the broadcast. The station was back on the air in a few weeks, and the employees were released in a few months.

“It hurt us a lot. It was really a painful year for us,” Aman said. “But despite all these challenges, we continue our activities.”

Radio also offers another key benefit to its audience: anonymity. Listeners can tune in privately and there’s no record of their activity once they switch off the receiver. Nobody knows who is listening, who is speaking on-air, or who is calling in. The ability to anonymously call a station comes up often in conversations about women’s radio, usually with a similar narrative.

Station managers have stories of women who call in to share experiences they can’t talk about with the people around them. Other women hearing the stories then realize they’ve had similar experiences. They call, too, and the process repeats, with more women calling in anonymously.

“You could call in and maybe disguise your voice a little bit, or maybe share something so intimate and personal because of the medium,” said De La Torre, the Arizona State University media professor. Because a sta-

“There is no more public space for women, and it’s kind of a public space,” Aman said of her station.

Women have been working to create these kinds of spaces on-air since the earliest years of radio. In the 1920s, when the technology was new (and practically all stations were run by men), “radio for women” meant programs aimed at those who were at home during the day. The BBC’s “Woman’s Hour” show dates to the service’s first year broadcasting. Some early programs focused on entertainment, such as soap operas or music. Other shows covered domestic issues like housekeeping and cooking. At their most relevant, these shows discussed nutrition, labor, and events that dominated many women’s lives at the time, often with women hosting.

“Radio bridged, connected, and blurred the boundaries between the private and public spheres and by doing so, spoke to women as housewives, workers, consumers and citizens,” says a UNESCO report on radio’s position in the world.

Modern women-run radio stations have seized on this potential to blur boundaries and adapted it to changing times and to specific locations and audience needs.

“If given the opportunity, radio becomes a really important agent of change for women, in particular, especially in cultures where to speak out and to be open and to have an opinion, to have a say, can kill you,” said Monica De La Torre, a media professor at Arizona State University and author of the book *Feminista Frequencies*. “We’re able to take this medium and create moments of intimacy and of sharing, and I don’t think we have enough spaces as women to do that.”

“If given the opportunity, radio becomes a really important agent of change for women ... especially in cultures where to speak out ... to have a say, can kill you.” Monica De La Torre, professor at Arizona State University

PREVIOUS PAGE: Hamida Aman, founder of Radio Begum, launched the women-run station in Kabul on International Women’s Day in 2021, just months before the Taliban retook power. Broadcasting programs on health, religion, and education, the station has become what Aman calls a public space serving Afghan women, despite tightening restrictions.



Rosa Ramon, co-founder and first station manager of KDNA-FM, helped build one of the first noncommercial Spanish-language radio stations in the United States. Through programming that addressed sexual abuse, mental health, education, and women’s rights — and by refusing to air music that demeaned women — Ramon and her colleagues created an on-air space for Spanish-speaking women in Washington’s Yakima Valley.

tion is local, a caller knows they will be heard by their community when they dial in to share a story. A listener knows they’re hearing their neighbor’s voice. Each broadcast chips away at a culture of silence.

De La Torre’s book *Feminista Frequencies* focuses largely on KDNA, a radio station in the Yakima Valley of Washington state. Although KDNA wasn’t founded specifically for women, through its leadership and programming decisions, it had a particularly strong effect on its female listening audience.

Founded in the late 1970s to provide media to farmworkers, KDNA was one of the few Spanish-language stations in the U.S. at the time — several historians say it’s the first such noncommercial station in the country. It was also one of the few stations with women in leadership.

Rosa Ramon, a co-founder of KDNA and its first station manager, recalled speaking at a conference of Spanish-language radio station managers around 1980.

“When I walked into the room to make my presentation, I was the only woman in the whole conference,” Ramon said. She didn’t feel so alone at KDNA, though. The head of the newsroom at the time was also a woman, as was the station’s music coordinator.

When Ramon talks about KDNA, she pronounces the call letters together into the station’s nickname, *cadena*, Spanish for “chain,” symbolizing the community connections the station was built upon — connections it tries to strengthen and spread.

“The station always made a point of focusing specifically on issues that affected women, serious issues,” Ramon said. “Sexual abuse, just about any subject you can think of — mental health, women’s careers, education.”

The shows invited women to call in and discuss difficult subjects like abusive relationships or, on one notable program, incest, which led to a significant response from listeners.

KDNA was also careful to keep from alienating female listeners during hours that weren’t specifically dedicated to women’s programming. For example, the station avoided playing music with misogynist lyrics.

“There were songs that sometimes would focus on things like a man killing his wife because she was unfaithful, but not making it sound like that’s not the right thing to do,” Ramon said. “We did not air anything that demeaned women or in some way would cause women harm.”

There was resistance to this kind of programming.

Women needed to push to be taken seriously as broadcasters, Ramon said.

“The men who were on the radio were immediately respected and they were important. And the women, on the other hand, sometimes we were in the position that we had to defend our reputation,” she said. “It was hard, you know ... especially in an agricultural area that’s very conservative, and not just the area being conservative, but the Chicano community being conservative in terms of their attitudes about women.”

Over time, Ramon noticed a shift — women were hearing they were not alone, and the men who listened heard women’s perspectives.

“I think the presence of women on the radio station helped change some of those attitudes,” she said.

KDNA was founded in part with grants for training and education. And the station trained many women on how to produce radio programs. “There were young women who came in who said later on, they never

politics and topics in the news. The station travels outside Kampala for remote broadcasts where women in smaller communities are invited to speak on-air. Off-air, Mama FM hosts workshops where women are trained in broadcasting, public speaking, and taking more prominent roles in the community.

“As women, we are not brought up to be leaders, but after we have trained the women, we expose them to the radio and encourage them to speak their minds,” Sentamu said. “They can now express themselves. They can engage in different forums. They have stood up for leadership positions, and they have become better communicators, particularly with their husbands. They now know when to engage their husbands on very important issues.”

Sentamu and Apalat said that women who have been to Mama FM’s workshops, on its programs, or have worked at the station have gone on to hold positions of leadership in other radio stations, in businesses, and in local politics.

“If your voice appears in the media strategically and speaking about issues, then it can form part of the national agenda,” Sentamu said.

Mama FM is licensed by the government, as are all radio stations in the country, but it receives no federal support. Most of its funding comes from NGOs and organizations based outside Uganda — including Norway (home of a feminist radio station that inspired Mama FM), Austria, and from the United Nations agency UNESCO. The station is looking for ways to keep paying its licensing fees and electricity bills. When I spoke with Sentamu and Apalat, they were in Tanzania at a meeting about fundraising put on by a Finnish organization.

“It is really tough to run women’s radio or not-for-profit radio stations,” Sentamu said. “Our governments do not support us, and they do not even appreciate why women’s voices have to appear, have to be represented in the media.”

The lack of appreciation can extend beyond government. Many media organizations lag in representation for women on-air. The 2025 United Nations Global Media Monitoring Project found that “of the people seen, heard, or spoken about in print and broadcast news, only 26% are women,” and progress in representation has essentially been flat since 2010.

“It’s very important [to have women on staff]. It makes the editorial newsroom richer,” said Lina Chawaf, a Syrian journalist who is now a visiting researcher at Harvard, where she was also a member of the 2025 fellowship class at the Nieman Foundation for Journalism. Chawaf was working for Arabesque FM in Syria when the civil war broke out in 2011. She refused to broadcast propaganda, and the regime “asked me to leave the country or they would kill my children.” In exile, Chawaf founded Radio Rozana, a station that focuses on human rights, with an emphasis on issues affecting women.

“I just had this dream, because I want to deliver the voice of the voiceless people inside Syria, especially the women that have always been obliged to be silent in our country,” Chawaf said.

Rozana broadcast citizen journalist reports and programs aimed at women from two transmitters — one

thought that anything like that would be possible for them,” Ramon said.

This is another commonality among women-run radio stations — the support of new generations of women in media.

“Media is power,” said Margaret Sentamu, executive director of the Uganda Media Women’s Association (UMWA). The association began in 1983 as an organization for women working in journalism. In 2001, it launched the radio station Mama FM in Uganda’s capital, Kampala, with the goal of putting more women on the air. Even though there were hundreds of radio stations in the country, they weren’t covering women, or when they did, the portrayals were often negative.

“The mainstream media was sidelining women,” said Sentamu, a co-founder of the station. “We thought that it was important to start our own radio station, where we would have the power to determine who appears on the radio and who does not appear on the radio.”

Mama FM broadcasts programs on human rights, gender-based violence, reproductive health, agriculture, and leadership, and the station helps connect women to services they may need in the area. It also has a specific goal of empowerment, and states as part of its mission under UMWA “to enhance the visibility and status of women and other marginalized groups.” Through training and by example, the station encourages women to become leaders in their homes and communities.

“We profile women who have achieved, who are making a difference in their communities,” said station manager Catherine Apalat. One program features panel discussions where women and men talk as equals about

Because a station is local, a caller knows they will be heard by their community. A listener knows they’re hearing their neighbor’s voice. Each broadcast chips away at a culture of silence.



ESA SALMINEN/MAMA FM

in Turkey near the border, and a smaller one hidden in northern Syria. Radio was more reliable than the internet given the shakiness of the electricity grid and uneven web access during the conflict. This accessibility, along with the localness and anonymity of the airwaves, made it possible for women “to talk and share their pain, share their point of view,” Chawaf said. It also can impart a feeling of comfort and a sense of stability during a crisis.

“Even listening to a voice talking to you gives you some space for feeling secure,” she said. “Even if you talk nothingness: ‘Hi, good morning. How are you?’ Even if you say all this, it gives you some [sense of] safety.”

Since launching Rozana, Chawaf has traveled the world to help start stations in remote and war-torn areas, including in Libya, Yemen, and Sudan. With each endeavor, she said she is “careful and aware about having women on the staff,” and representing a wide array of diverse voices. In one meeting about setting up a station, she had an experience similar to Ramon’s at the station manager’s conference 46 years ago.

“I was looking and I said: ‘There’s no women here. I’m the only woman here,’” Chawaf recalled. This wasn’t due to a lack of interest from women. Chawaf worked on diversifying the team, and now that organization has more women on staff than men, she said.

Like the leaders of KDNA and Mama FM, Chawaf, who left Rozana in 2025, has stories of women who called in anonymously to discuss a subject and ended

up having their lives changed. She recalled one woman who told her: “I was listening to Rozana, and I discovered that my husband, who is beating me every day, that it’s not his right.” Chawaf recalled. “She started calling Rozana, and we put her in contact with a lawyer in Turkey, and she was able to divorce.” After that, Chawaf said, the woman became a journalist for the station.

Chawaf also has stories of men who heard a program and were spurred to take action. She remembers a partner in a mental health organization telling her that men were bringing their wives or sisters to the clinic, saying, “We were listening to the radio to Rozana, and we discovered that we have to bring them here,” she said.

“It’s changing behavior, and we were happy.” As they pursue their mission, each outlet has gone beyond its initial medium. They stream online, they post to social media, and, like Mama FM, they host events. (Rozana stopped broadcasting over the air after Chawaf left.) KDNA hosts health fairs and distributes cards with information about preventing sexual harassment in agricultural work, among its other community activities. The station is a hub that fosters a physical version of the community-building it began on-air.

Whether broadcasting from a tower, streaming to a phone, uploading a podcast to a server, convening a meeting in a local hall, or posting to a social media channel, these stations carry on the core mission from their foundations in radio — to give women a voice. ■

Catherine Apalat, station manager of Mama FM in Kampala, leads Uganda’s first women-focused radio station. Through programs on human rights, gender-based violence, and public affairs, Apalat helps create on-air forums where women speak as experts and equals — as well as off-air workshops that train them to become stronger communicators and community leaders.

1979

Frank Van Riper, a documentary and fine art photographer, has released a new book with his wife and longtime collaborator, Judith Goodman, “The Green Heart of Italy: Umbria and Its Ancient Neighbors.” Illustrated with more than 90 photographs, the book explores the beauty of the landlocked region known for its medieval hill towns.

1983

Callie Crossley was inducted into the National Association of Black Journalists Hall of Fame in 2025. She hosts the radio show and podcast “Under the Radar with Callie Crossley” and co-hosts the radio program and podcast “The Culture Show” for GBH Boston. She spent 13 years as a producer for ABC News’ “20/20” and received an Oscar nomination for her work as a producer, director, and writer on the PBS documentary series “Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years.”

1991

Rui Araújo has published a new book, “A Treasure in the Desert” (“Um tesouro no deserto: O Algarve entre montes e memorias”), which features the stories of people living in the remote “montes” of Algarve in southern Portugal. Araújo is Nieman’s first fellow from Portugal.

1998

Marcelo Leite, a science and environment columnist at Brazil’s *Folha de S.Paulo*, is author of the new book “A Ciência Encantada de Jurema,” about *jurema preta* (*Mimosa tenuiflora*), a tree containing the psychedelic substance DMT which is now being researched as a potential medicine for treatment-resistant depression. The book will be published in English by Springer Nature.

2003

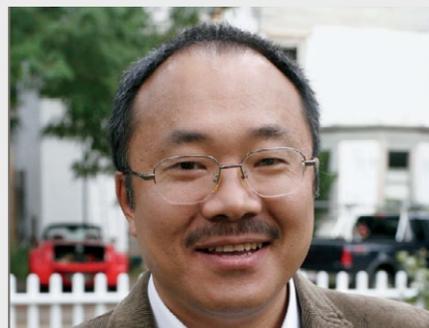
Ann M. Simmons has joined Northeastern University as the new executive editor of Northeastern Global News, the university’s news organization. Simmons previously served as Moscow bureau chief for *The Wall Street Journal* and has reported on stories around the world for the *Journal*, the *Los Angeles Times* and *Time* magazine.

2004

Carol Bradley, who writes about how animals are treated in the U.S., recently published her third book, “Twisting in Air: The Sensational Rise of a Hollywood Falling Horse.” The book won a Will Rogers Medallion Award, which recognizes outstanding achievement in Western books and media.

Indira Lakshmanan has joined WBUR as a new co-host of “Here & Now.” Lakshmanan most recently was the ideas and opinions editor at U.S. News & World Report.

Susan Orlean, staff writer for *The New Yorker*, is author of the forthcoming book “Joyride: A Memoir.” “The story of my life is the story of my stories,” she writes. Orlean offers insights about her creative process and provides the backstory of how she wrote some of her most famous articles.



2007

Dong Yuyu, NF ‘07, a veteran Chinese journalist who is serving a seven-year prison sentence in Beijing, was honored with the Committee to Protect Journalists’ International Press Freedom Award in November. He was detained while dining with a Japanese diplomat in February 2022 and officially charged with spying in March 2023. His appeal was rejected by a Beijing court on Nov. 13, 2025, in a ruling that drew widespread criticism from advocates of press freedom worldwide.

2008

Simon Wilson is now interim Near East regional director for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, overseeing language services for Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Wilson has been working as an editorial consultant for RFE/RL in Prague since January.

2009

Margie Mason and her AP colleague Robin McDowell won the National Press Club’s Consumer Journalism Award for

their “Prison to Plate” investigation, which exposes how prisoners in the U.S. are part of a hidden workforce linked to hundreds of popular food brands.

Chris Vognar has joined *The Boston Globe* as a TV and pop culture critic. He has contributed to *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *Rolling Stone*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and other publications as a freelance culture writer.

2010

Monica Campbell, director of the California Local News Fellowship program at UC Berkeley’s Graduate School of Journalism, received a career achievement award in broadcast journalism from the Northern California chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists. A longtime public radio reporter, Campbell previously was the Mexico City correspondent for PRI’s “The World.”

Beth Macy is author of “Paper Girl: A Memoir of Home and Family in a Fractured America,” which was released in 2025. In her deeply personal book, she examines the changes and eroding social fabric that have transformed her hometown of Urbana, Ohio.

2011

Tony Bartelme, senior projects reporter for *The Post* and *Courier* in Charleston, South Carolina, is author of “Rising Waters: Reports from Across a Rapidly Warming World.” Bartelme recently won the National Press Club’s Michael A. Dornheim Award for “Eject!” his story about a Marine’s decision to bail out of a failing F-35B fighter jet.

Michael Fitzgerald is the new editor-in-chief of *Cambridge Day*, a nonprofit, donor-supported news service offering local news coverage in Cambridge and Somerville, Massachusetts. Fitzgerald most recently served as editor-in-chief at Harvard Public Health, which he relaunched as an independent digital platform focused on solutions journalism about public health.

2012

Anna Griffin has joined *The New York Times* as Pacific Northwest bureau chief, covering a region that includes Washington, Oregon, Montana, and Alaska. For the last decade, she has run the newsroom at Oregon Public Broadcasting, and before that was a reporter, columnist, and editor at *The Oregonian*. Griffin recently was a fellow in the Sulzberger Executive Leadership

Morton Mintz, NF ’64, longtime investigative journalist for The Washington Post, dies at 103

The award-winning consumer affairs reporter helped uncover the dangers of thalidomide and other risks to the public

Morton Mintz, a dogged investigative reporter for *The Washington Post*, died on July 28, 2025, at his home in Washington, D.C. He was 103.

Mintz reported extensively for the *Post* on corporate crime and misconduct, with a special focus on the automotive, tobacco, and drug industries. He broke the story about the birth defects associated with the sedative thalidomide in 1962 and continued to report extensively on unsafe and ineffective medicines and medical devices, including the harmful Dalkon Shield IUD.

During his three decades at the *Post*, he also covered the Supreme Court, campaign financing, and wasteful Pentagon weapons systems. He was an active member of the Newspaper Guild.

One of Mintz’s most noteworthy investigations followed General Motors’ attempts to discredit consumer advocate Ralph Nader, whose 1965 book, “Unsafe at Any Speed,” concluded that serious design flaws in the Chevrolet Corvair made it dangerous to drive.

In addition to his numerous articles for *Nieman Reports*, Mintz was a senior advisor and frequent contributor to the Nieman Foundation’s Watchdog Project.

Writing from his home in Washington, D.C., in 2022, he reflected on his life: “I have been a very lucky guy in so many ways, certainly in my career. I loved being a reporter, starting at *The Michigan Daily* when I was a student at the University of Michigan. My Nieman Fellowship played a wonderful role by giving me months of the intellectual stimulation that Harvard provided. And, if I may say this, my 69-year



Morton Mintz, an award-winning investigative journalist, pictured at home reading *Nieman Reports* in 2022.

marriage could not have been a happier one.”

Mintz was born in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 1922 and graduated from the University of Michigan in 1943. He enlisted in the Navy, where he served as a communications officer and later commanding officer on a transport ship that participated in the D-Day invasion of Normandy during World War II.

Mintz started working as a reporter at the *St. Louis Star-Times* in 1946. In 1951, he moved to the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, where he was a reporter and assistant city editor before joining *The Washington Post* in 1958. He also contributed articles to other

national publications and lectured about journalism and his work at universities across the country.

In a *Washington Post* article published when Mintz retired from the paper in 1988, *Post* columnist Colman McCarthy, wrote: “If every news organization had a core of reporters like Mintz — a tireless striver for accuracy and fierce skeptic of party lines — the public might not keep issuing low rankings of the media. ... He uncovered so much news that the morning *Post* often carried two, three, or four Mintz bylined stories. He could have been a one-man wire service.”

Mintz is the author of four books and co-author of six more and served as chair of the Fund for Investigative Journalism from 1990 to 1993. His first book, “The Therapeutic Nightmare,” a critical look at the FDA, the American Medical Association and pharmaceutical manufacturers, grew out of his Nieman Fellowship.

His many honors include the Worth Bingham Prize for Investigative Journalism — won in 1976 for his *Washington Post* series “The Medicine Business” — the Heywood Broun Award and the Raymond Clapper and George Polk Memorial Awards. He twice received the Washington-Baltimore Newspaper Guild Award for Public Service as well as the Guild’s Distinguished Writing Award. His book “America, Inc.: Who Owns and Operates the United States,” co-authored with Jerry S. Cohen, won the Sidney Hillman Award.

Memorial gifts may be made to the Nieman Foundation or the Fund for Investigative Journalism. ■

Program at Columbia University.

Raquel Rutledge has joined ProPublica as a reporter on the national desk. Rutledge most recently was the investigations editor for *The Examination*, which she helped to launch in 2023. She previously spent nearly 20 years as an investigative reporter and deputy editor at the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*.

2013

Katrin Bennhold, is the lead writer

and host of “The World,” a new global newsletter from *The New York Times* that provides a digest of top international stories, analysis, and video conversations with on-the-ground journalists. Bennhold has worked as a *Times* correspondent for more than 20 years, serving as Berlin bureau chief and reporting from London and Paris.

Blair Kamin received the 2025 Gerald W. Adelman Conservation Leadership Award from Openlands, a Chicago-based nonprofit

that protects the natural and open spaces of northeastern Illinois and the surrounding region. The award recognized Kamin’s work during his 28 years as the *Chicago Tribune*’s architecture critic.

Yaakov Katz, former editor-in-chief of *The Jerusalem Post*, is co-author with Amir Bohbot of “While Israel Slept: How Hamas Surprised the Most Powerful Military in the Middle East,” which was released in September 2025.

2014

Susie Banikarim has joined Columbia Journalism Review to write the Laurel and Darts column. Banikarim has served in a number of newsroom leadership roles, directed the 2020 documentary “Enemies of the People: Trump and the Political Press” and cohosted the podcast “In Retrospect.”

2015

Ann Marimow has joined the Washington bureau of The New York Times as part of the Times’ expanding Supreme Court team, and will serve as the lead writer on the cases that come before the court. She previously was a Supreme Court correspondent for The Washington Post.

2016

Christopher Weyant, a New Yorker cartoonist, children’s book illustrator, and editorial cartoonist, received a 2024 Silver Reuben Award from the National Cartoonist Society in the single-panel gag cartoon category in August 2025.

Photojournalist **Anastasia Taylor-Lind**, NF ’16, and Ukrainian writer and anthropologist **Alisa Sopova**, NF ’17, have been working together since 2014 to document the everyday experience of armed conflict in Ukraine. They recently launched 5Kfromthefrontline.com, a new multimedia storytelling website highlighting their ongoing reporting project.

2018

Glenda Gloria, co-founder and executive editor of the Filipino news site Rappler, has been selected as Esquire Philippines’ Journalist of the Year. In an interview with the magazine, Gloria said: “This is the best job in the world. It brings you to the corridors of power. But also mandates you to speak truth to power. You also have the mandate of the public to actually demolish that power if it does wrong.”

Sipho Kings, co-founder and publisher of the pan-African weekly The Continent, a PDF e-paper distributed primarily on WhatsApp, has worked with colleagues to launch a new sister publication, The Friday Paper, which will be published on messaging apps catering specifically to readers in South Africa.

2019

Juan Arredondo, a visual journalist and assistant professor of journalism at Rutgers University–Newark, co-produced “Armed Only with a Camera: The Life and Death of Brent Renaud,” which was released by HBO in 2025. The documentary, which has been nominated for a 2026 Academy Award, tells the story of Brent’s life and of his death while on assignment with Arredondo — his friend and Nieman classmate — in Ukraine in 2022. Brent was the first American journalist killed while covering the war, and Arredondo was seriously wounded in the same attack.

Myroslava Gongadze has joined the Atlantic Council’s Eurasia Center as a nonresident senior fellow. She is also a Senior Fellow for Peace, Security and Defence at Friends of Europe, supporting the organization’s Ukraine Initiative. Gongadze was the first Eastern Europe bureau chief for Voice of America and served as chief of VOA’s Ukrainian Service in Washington, D.C.

Steve Myers has started a new position as interim managing editor at The Examination, a nonprofit newsroom focused on global health threats. He previously was a New Orleans-based senior editor for ProPublica’s Local Reporting Network.

2020

András Pethő, co-founder and executive director of the Direkt36 investigative reporting center in Hungary, received a Free Media Award on behalf of his newsroom’s team. Presented jointly by the Fritt Ord Foundation and Zeit Stiftung Bucerius, the award honors Eastern European journalists who produce quality journalism despite political threats and attacks.

Todd Wallack has joined The Washington Post as an education accountability reporter on the national education team, focusing on stories that hold powerful people and institutions to account. He previously was an investigative and data reporter and deputy managing editor for WBUR in Boston.

2022

Natalia Viana, co-founder and executive director of Agência Pública, Brazil’s first nonprofit investigative journalism outlet, has been awarded a 2025 Maria Moors Cabot Prize, which honors outstanding reporting on the Americas.

2023

Deborah Barfield Berry is the new director of the Annapolis bureau of the student-powered Capital News Service, which is run by the University of Maryland’s Philip Merrill College of Journalism. A graduate of the school and a member of the Merrill College Hall of Fame, Berry previously was a national correspondent for USA Today.

Ashish Dikshit is the new head of digital platform strategy and delivery for BBC News Global. Dikshit previously served in an interim role as head of regional journalism for Central and South Asia for the BBC World Service.

2024

Julia Barton, founder of RadioWright, a full-service audio project development and consulting company, has launched Continuous Wave, a weekly newsletter and site exploring the forgotten history of broadcast and all electronic media.

Cristela Guerra has joined Report for America as regional manager of the South/Southwest, overseeing 35 journalists covering a variety of beats and the media companies they work for across nine states. Now based in El Paso, Texas, Guerra previously was a senior arts and culture reporter for WBUR in Boston.

Beandrea July, a writer, film critic, film programmer, and audio producer, has started “Annotations,” a new podcast that thinks critically about criticism.

2025

Nilesh Christopher is a Senior Tarbell Fellow at the Tarbell Center for AI Journalism and is working as a technology reporter for the Los Angeles Times, focusing on the societal impact of artificial intelligence. Christopher previously worked as the South Asia correspondent for Rest of World.

Ryan Kellett, a 2025 Nieman-Berkman Klein Fellow, has joined the board of trustees at The Conversation U.S. Before his Nieman year, Kellett was vice president of audience at Axios Media and senior director of audience for The Washington Post. He also serves as board treasurer for ONA.

Robert Libetti has joined The New York Times as a senior producer for the Times’ video department, where he will work with

Victor K. McElheny, NF ’63, founding director of the Knight Science Journalism Program at MIT, dies at 89

The accomplished science writer mentored hundreds of journalists around the globe

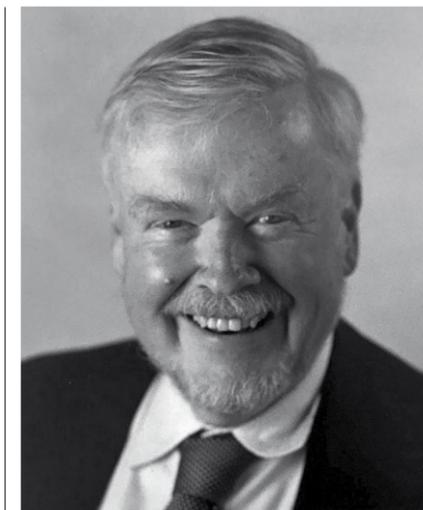
Victor K. McElheny, a science journalist and author who co-founded the Knight Science Journalism Program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, died on July 14, 2025, in Lexington, Massachusetts, after a brief illness. He was 89.

During his long and distinguished career, McElheny covered science and technology for leading publications including The Charlotte Observer, The Boston Globe, Science, and The New York Times, where he started one of the first technology columns in American newspapers. He reported on a wide range of topics including the Apollo lunar landing program, molecular biology, and the sequencing of the human genome.

Born in Boston in 1935, McElheny grew up in Poughkeepsie, New York. He attended Phillips Exeter Academy, where he wrote for the school newspaper, The Exonian, and later reported for The Harvard Crimson as a Harvard student.

After graduating from college in 1957, he worked briefly at the Florence (S.C.) Morning News, before joining The Charlotte Observer as a reporter. He returned to Harvard as the Arthur D. Little Fellow in the Nieman Class of 1963, concentrating on science and its impact.

Following his Nieman fellowship, McElheny worked as a writer at the Swedish-American News Exchange in Stockholm before becoming the European correspondent for Science, based in London. In 1966, he returned to the United States, where he joined The Boston Globe and served as a science editor until 1972. He also contributed to Time magazine, The



Victor K. McElheny, a trailblazing science journalist, died on July, 14, 2025.

Technology Review, The Washington Post, and WGBH-TV.

He worked as a consultant for the Polaroid Corporation from 1972 to 1973. In 1998, he wrote his first book, “Insisting on the Impossible, the Life of Edwin Land, Inventor of Instant Photography,” about the founder of Polaroid.

In 1973, McElheny joined The New York Times as a technology reporter before serving as the inaugural director of the Banbury Center at the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory in New York from 1978 to 1982.

In 1983, together with MIT President Paul Gray and then-director of MIT’s Science, Technology and Society Program, Carl Kaysen, McElheny co-founded the Knight Science Journalism Program at MIT and served as its director until 1998. He remained actively involved with the program and was

a research affiliate in MIT’s Program on Science, Technology and Society.

In a 2013 Nieman Reports article, McElheny credited his Nieman experience as a guiding force in the creation of the Knight Science Journalism Program:

“My Nieman year was a stunning combination of contact with leading newsmakers, including [U.S. Attorney General] Bobby Kennedy reviewing the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the intense competition of first-class fellow professionals. The meaning of a career in journalism was raised to a new level. ... So in 1981, when the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) approached me to start a program for science journalists modeled on the Nieman Fellowship, I knew exactly what to do.”

McElheny worked to raise long-term funding for the program and in 1987 obtained a multimillion-dollar grant from the Knight Foundation for an endowment. Originally known as the Vannevar Bush Science Journalism Fellowship Program before it was renamed the Knight Science Journalism Program, the fellowship has benefited more than 400 leading science journalists from around the world.

McElheny and his wife, Ruth, contributed over several years to an endowment for an annual KSJ prize, now named the Victor K. McElheny Award, which honors outstanding local and regional journalism covering issues in science, public health, technology, or the environment.

In addition to his biography of Edwin Land, McElheny wrote the 2003 biography “Watson and DNA: Making a Scientific Revolution” and “Drawing the Map of Life: Inside the Human Genome Project,” published in 2010. McElheny covered stories about DNA before he met James Watson during his Nieman year at Harvard.

The McElheny family invites those wishing to make a memorial gift in his honor to donate to the Victor K. McElheny Award Fund at MIT. ■

the Visual Investigations team. Libetti previously was an executive producer at The Wall Street Journal, where he created and led a team that produced video investigations and documentaries.

Ben Reininga, a 2025 Nieman-Berkman Klein Fellow, was named a Fall 2025 Shorenstein Fellow at Harvard Kennedy School’s Shorenstein Center on Media,

Politics and Public Policy. Reininga is vice president of audio and video at Politico.

Sandrine Rigaud has joined the Global Investigative Journalism Network as program director and will work to help support and empower investigative journalists around the world. Rigaud previously was editor-in-chief of Forbidden Stories.

2026

Marcela García, an opinion columnist and associate editor at The Boston Globe, was recognized for three of her opinion columns at the NAHJ New England Journalism Awards. García created and writes iMira!, the Globe’s first weekly newsletter written in both English and Spanish. ■

COURTESY OF THE KNIGHT SCIENCE JOURNALISM PROGRAM AT MIT

‘An instinct for exploration’ Strong role models, innate curiosity combine to forge a journalist’s path

BY MARCELA GARCÍA

I am both deeply suspicious of, and fascinated by, astrology. I have examined my birth chart intensely at various points in my life, not because I believe the planets govern my destiny, but because the impulse to look — to search for meaning in a symbolic map — says more about me than the stars ever could.

I eventually understood that this urge had nothing to do with astrology. Long before I knew what journalism was, I was paying attention, one of the profession’s most basic tenets.

In the end, a deep-seated instinct to wander and wonder, plus a series of happy



accidents mixed with hard work, explain how I became a journalist.

That instinct arrived early. The first time I felt it I was on a pink bicycle.

I grew up in downtown Monterrey, Mexico, the middle child of three girls living in a loud, busy, and rough urban neighborhood. Neither of my parents had bikes or even knew how to ride one. But a boy I liked did, and so did his sister. I watched them fly down the street, disappear around corners, exhilarated. They had things I didn’t have: independence, mobility, access.

When I asked for a bike at about 11 years old, my parents thought it was absurd. My sisters weren’t interested at all. Still, that Christmas, Santa delivered a pink bike with a white basket. It was totally unexpected. Later, I learned my mom bought it herself.

It was the best gift I could have received. The bike unlocked something in my brain. It was my mom signaling that she trusted me to go places.

A few years later, my dad gave me a sort of unintended gift: a love for reading.



ABOVE: Marcela García (NF '26), back right, with her sisters and mother in 1980 in Monterrey, Mexico. BELOW: García at the Charles River in Boston in the early 2000s, after leaving Mexico to enroll at Harvard Extension School and begin her journalism career in the U.S.

TOP AND LEFT: COURTESY OF MARCELA GARCÍA RIGHT: VICTOR PEÑA

My parents didn’t go to college. They never read us bedtime stories as children because books weren’t part of their own childhoods. But my father read voraciously. When I was 14, I overheard him warning my mother to keep the novel he was reading out of reach. He didn’t want his daughters to get hold of it by accident.

Naturally, I made it my mission to immediately find and read the book. It was Sidney Sheldon’s “If Tomorrow Comes,” a melodramatic thriller featuring a woman who survives betrayal, prison, and violence before reinventing herself on her own terms.

The adult content was the point of entry, but what stayed with me was something else: the recognition that fiction stories contained meaning and that women could occupy the center of narrative gravity.

When my father discovered what I was reading, I could tell he was slightly proud. And he fed my new habit. We read every Sidney Sheldon novel published.

By my teenage years, I was obsessed with books. But I didn’t know how to turn that obsession into a career.

Higher education was nonnegotiable in our household. All three sisters would go to college. In Mexico’s system, you choose a field before you enroll, and changing your mind basically means starting over. I chose economics almost casually, intrigued by the forces then shaping Mexico: Technocrats were in power, and the North American Free Trade Agreement was in the air.

It would take me three years to admit I hated it. Not just the heavy math involved but the abstractions: people reduced to variables, behavior to equations, and human motivation to neat curves on a graph. I felt trapped in a five-year commitment that I didn’t know how to escape.

The relief came through writing — specifically, a literature class taught by a notoriously difficult professor. For the final paper, I procrastinated until the last few hours before it was due. The assignment was to pick three readings from the syllabus, identify a theme they shared, and write an essay reflecting on it. I finally found a common thread, and I remember feeling energized, high on the joy of having figured it out at the last minute, all by myself.

The literature professor gave me an A-plus, noting it was the best paper he had



Reina Margarita Olivo holds a portrait of her daughter Reina Carolina Morales Rojas, a Salvadoran immigrant who went missing in Massachusetts in November 2022.

read in a long time. I was hooked on that feeling.

That exercise gave me the first real taste of the joy that comes from making sense of scattered information, pulling threads together until a narrative snaps into focus.

A year before graduation, by sheer chance, I landed a part-time job as a news assistant for an American journalist in Monterrey. I conducted interviews, transcribed tapes, and attended press conferences. I learned how to be a journalist.

I also learned what journalism costs in Mexico — the danger, the silence, the compromises. By the time I graduated, I knew I wanted to be a journalist, but not there.

So, I left and moved to Boston two decades ago. I enrolled in the Harvard Extension School and earned a graduate degree in journalism. I entered the profession through Spanish-language media, immigrant communities, underfunded newsrooms doing urgent work with limited resources. That work

“**A deep-seated instinct to wander and wonder, plus a series of happy accidents mixed with hard work, explain how I became a journalist.**”

taught me that truth tends to live close to the margins, far from spectacle.

Everything that followed, including my work as a columnist at The Boston Globe, came from that foundation. So did my understanding of whose stories matter.

A large part of that understanding comes from my mother.

Her example shaped how I see work, risk, responsibility, and possibility. She modeled the instinct to keep trying, to stay curious, to move even when the path wasn’t clear.

If I had to use a word to describe her it would be intrepid. She was trained as a secretary and taught us shorthand and typing, turning speed and precision into games. She sold Avon and Tupperware, took language classes, did aerobics, opened and closed ventures. What others saw as inconsistency was, in fact, an instinct for exploration.

She is the reason I’ve become passionate about documenting the lives of undocumented immigrant women — women like Rosa, who cleaned the Globe offices, or Reina Carolina, whose disappearance exposed the cracks in Boston’s care for immigrant communities.

I recognize my mother’s courage in women like them who carry entire worlds on their backs while the rest of society barely notices. I think I do what I do because I was raised by a woman who taught me that even ordinary lives contain extraordinary truths and that those truths deserve to be acknowledged and preserved. ■

Digging for Truth

Journalism, like tending olive trees, takes meticulous care, skill, and perseverance

BY SOTIRIS SIDERIS

Our family olive grove, outside Paiania, my hometown in the eastern suburbs of Athens, is close to the airport, close to sprawl, and close to my deepest memories. It's the place I return to, and when I return, I dig.

It's not a place for fetishized agrarian nostalgia or rural sentimentalism. Digging, in this place, is a cultural technique.

In media theory, a “cultural technique” is more than a practice; it's a foundational operation through which meaning, systems, and entire worlds

are created. Digging in the earth (like writing, counting, or drawing) is one such technique. It leaves traces. It rearranges

“Everything began here, with the earth, the labor, the slow growth of my family's plot.”

the land. It makes some things visible, while burying others.

This narrow strip of land — a small rectangular plot with space for just two rows of local olive trees — was planted by my grandparents, Spiros and Sotiria, with their hands. At the time, Greece had no formal land registry, no secure documentation of rural land borders. My grandfather tended the land carefully — watering those first trees one by one, carrying buckets of water up and down the rows.

A baby olive tree is fragile: Wind can bend it, animals can snap it, or a neighbor can simply claim that the land it is on was always theirs. So my grandfather watered constantly, far more regularly than my brother and I would do when planting our own trees decades later.

He watered to help them survive, but also to help the land speak. To make the trees grow strong enough to stand as living evidence of belonging. A kind of manual inscription through care. Today, the young trees my brother and I planted nearly 20



Sotiris Sideris (NF '26), pictured in 2019 in the newsroom of AthensLive, where he reported on housing and land justice issues in Greece.

LEFT: ANGELOS CHRISTOFILOPOULOS RIGHT: SOTIRIS SIDERIS



The Sideris family olive grove in Paiania, near Athens, Greece, and olives freshly harvested from their land. Sideris believes cultivating olive trees teaches patience and attention to detail — characteristics he carries into his journalism work.

years ago are fully formed; the embodied result of generations of digging.

Our digging has always been stubbornly manual: cyclical, slow, physical. And yet it's also metaphysical. It is how I learn. How I investigate. How I reject the surface-level explanation.

Digging teaches patience. It teaches skepticism. It teaches attention: not to what is projected from above, but to what is withheld, layered, embedded further down.

And this resonates deeply with my journalism, especially when dealing with opaque systems; with platforms and institutions that exercise power quietly; with the hidden systems, routines, and

defaults that shape behavior and become ideology while evading scrutiny.

Everything began here, with the earth, the labor, the slow growth of my family's plot.

It serves to remind me that investigating is not always about chasing the “new,” but sometimes about recovering older, slower ways of knowing. About honoring the techniques that make meaning possible in the first place.

The work remains small; it's local and physical. A family thing. It is the reality of digging as maintenance — the ongoing, unglamorous work of clearing weeds, pruning branches, cutting away what's dead so what's alive can breathe. And then,



after pruning, you gather the dry branches and you set them on fire, turning excess into ash, ash into soil, soil into nutrients, so that the trees can breathe again in spring.

Digging is never a singular event; it's a commitment to return, revisit, and reenter the same terrain while noticing what's changed.

And land — like data, like archives, like systems — becomes wild if you don't tend to it. It grows its own noise.

My work is full of this kind of clearing as well. You gather that noise before you reduce it: raw data, duplicated records, files that were never meant to be read, the entropy of institutions. Then you prune: the branches of bureaucracy where responsibility dissolves, the overgrowth of PR language that makes accountability feel impossible, the thickets of misinformation that make harm untraceable. And sometimes you have to let things burn: false leads, dead ends, stories that don't hold up. Destruction is part of the discipline. But when you burn carefully, with intention, you create the conditions for something new to grow. A line of sight. A pathway. A truth that can breathe.

This is about that work. The slow, repetitive, unheroic part. The kind that doesn't make headlines, but makes all the rest possible. ■

Human Drama Affects Many at U.S. Immigration Facility

A security guard's reaction at the sight of a family's anguish produces a heart-wrenching image

BY CAROL GUZY

Sometimes it's the quiet, unexpected moments that can reach most deeply into the collective conscience of a nation.

I had just finished documenting a migrant detention in immigration court in New York, and was gathering basic information as we headed outside — the family inconsolable with despair.

"Please help me, please help me!" the man's wife cried. "Take me too!" she said, as federal immigration agents dragged her husband away. Outside the building, she continued crying as a security guard came to assist her and her two young children. The guard was overcome — as I was — at the sight of the woman's visceral anguish. I instinctively took two frames as the guard broke down in tears. I also wept. Court observers later helped the family into a car, heading home to a now uncertain future — one that had changed in an instant.

Security guards are often caught between immigration authorities, migrants, observers, activists, and members of the media as courthouse dynamics play out in what's becoming the "new normal" in America. This emotional family separation was one of many I have been documenting for months at the Jacob Javits Federal Building in Lower Manhattan, where immigration cases are heard and detainees are held. Federal agents assisting U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) now regularly wait outside courtrooms with photos of migrants they use to identify those who've been targeted to be taken into custody or deported.

Often, as someone leaves their immigration hearing — even if a judge has granted a continuance of their case — officers will surround them. At first they seem perplexed, then they experience



a moment of realization and shock. Following that, either reluctant acceptance, or anguish and tears. After everything they've been through — including an often arduous journey seeking asylum and the American dream — most walk quietly along on their final steps to a new destiny: the limbo of detention or deportation. Any

actual legal charges against them are often not made public by ICE.

As a journalist, it is my job to report fairly and accurately. I believe we need to check our biases at the door, and let our photographs speak. But the most heart-wrenching stories to document are family separations. Children are traumatized watching a parent being

taken away by masked men in a place they thought they were coming to for due process.

My own father died when I was 6 years old, so I understand deeply the eternal hole this loss can leave in a child's heart. The loss has aftershocks as families struggle without a breadwinner.

Whichever side of our deep political divide one sits on, the inescapable reality is that it's too often spouses and innocent children who are caught in the crossfire of controversial immigration reform tactics.

When strangers on the subway see my cameras, they often ask what I'm covering.

When I tell them — many thank me for documenting this important story. More than ever, the media is playing a crucial role in showing the effects of these policies on real people. It can be soul-crushing at times to bear witness, but it is vitally important. ■

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