

Nieman



Beyond the “Coming Out” Story

How journalists are
responding to this
watershed period for
transgender coverage

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Contributors



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Helen Lewis (page 30) is deputy editor of the *New Statesman*, a British political weekly magazine, and a contributor to *The Guardian*, *Sunday Times*, and *Financial Times*. Her current special interest is in how the Internet is shaping our ideas about identity. She tweets @helenlewis.



John Dyer (page 36) is a deputy editor for *Associated Reporters Abroad*. His work has appeared in *The Boston Globe* and *Vice News*. In addition to reporting throughout the access-averse Balkans, he’s used public records laws in New Jersey to cover corruption in politics.



Sara Morrison (page 20) has been an assistant editor at *Columbia Journalism Review* and a senior writer for *Boston.com*. Her work has also appeared on *Poynter*, *The Atlantic Wire*, and *The Wrap*. Her media reporting often focuses on newsroom diversity and innovation. She lives in New York.



Transgender activist Kris Hayashi says transgender stories are being covered with a frequency “unimaginable” three years ago

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CORRECTION

Due to a reporting error, “Listen Up” in the Fall 2015 issue of Nieman Reports incorrectly described how ProPublica uses callouts.

ProPublica uses callouts, posted as reporters work on an investigation, not to determine if a story should be pursued but because they sometimes yield valuable information.

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You Are Who You Hire

What a profile of Nicki Minaj can teach us about how newsrooms build credibility with readers

ON A RECENT VISIT TO MY DAUGHTER'S college campus, I heard student musicians talking about a New York Times Magazine profile, "The Passion of Nicki Minaj," but it wasn't what the Times likely hoped for when putting a rapper on the cover. Rather than appeal to the generation that has made Minaj one of pop music's reigning powers, the story was banished to a dreaded archive. "It's out of touch," my daughter said.

I wished Times editors could have heard what I did: a sophisticated critique of the writer's misreading of Minaj's art and views on race and feminism, and disappointment that the musician's commentary on slights to black female artists had been trivialized as mere revenge drama. There were other cringe-worthy tells I had overlooked in my own reading of the story, including misspellings of common rapper slang.

"If you want to take pop culture seriously," my daughter continued, "then you have to take Nicki Minaj seriously. But she talked down to her and discounted the feelings of a generation of black artists."

When I returned home, I searched for published reactions to the story and found that publications as varied as Salon, Feministing, and USA Today had detailed its shortcomings, explaining Minaj's abrupt dismissal of the reporter: "I don't care to speak to you any more."

Salon, perhaps hyperbolically, called the profile "one of the most condescending and

intellectually offensive pieces of journalism written on a subject this year," adding: "That no editor on staff knew or cared enough to correct her misspelling of both 'diss tracks' and 'gold grills' is further proof of co-signed intellectual ignorance."

Embedded in the criticisms of this one story are so many of the issues challenging journalism more broadly. Issues of credibility. Of newsroom diversity. Of cross-generational competence. Of authenticity. And unlike many of the forces buffeting journalism, these are within our control.

The students correctly assumed the writer was neither particularly young nor African American. They didn't disqualify otherwise experienced journalists from writing about rap, but were critical of news organizations that acknowledge the primacy of expertise in some areas, but not all. They have expectations of equality that many of our news outlets do not reflect. By almost every measurement, the U.S. journalism workforce is out of step with the nation's demographics.

I recently attended a Corporation for Public Broadcasting retreat and asked "Frontline" executive producer Raney Aronson-Rath about her most pressing concerns. Building teams, she said—teams that can be effective in creating the journalistically ambitious and digitally sophisticated work she aspires to. Succeeding at this is vital, yet at many news shops, colleagues fail to find common cause with their most important allies—other colleagues. Were there young diverse journalists at the Times whose knowledge could have improved the magazine story, or do legacy newsrooms still make it hard for those voices to be heard? The leak in 2014 of the Times innovation report underscored organizational roadblocks that are not unique to that newsroom, one of our greatest journalistic enterprises, but common to many.

Here's one example. At its annual meeting, the Public Radio Program Directors Association reviewed a worrying drop in millennial listeners and Tayla Burney, a young producer from WAMU in Washington, D.C., remembers the discussion this way: "A gentleman ... referenced the challenge

of capturing a younger audience and said something along the lines of 'we know millennials are lazy.' He prefaced it by saying it was something he'd heard from an 'expert' ... It struck me as a weird thing to say about any audience you would like to appeal to. And about a cohort that ... probably works for you within your organization. In short, it's a lazy way to think about a huge area for potential growth."

In an interview with recent Knight Nieman Visiting Fellow Melody Kramer, Burney said she created a Facebook page for public media millennials and posted: "WE ARE HERE! We are working for you—tirelessly!—and we are so passionate about this work and excited about the future."

The workplace estrangement Burney describes is not limited to generational issues, but a clear echo of the technology gulf some still experience. As part of the annual Nieman Lab predictions package, we asked Alisha Ramos of Vox Media to tell us what she foresaw for 2015. "Reporters, designers and developers become BFFs" was the optimistic headline on her story, but her essay described a wary environment.

"Many of our writers come from organizations where developers were either nonexistent or huddled in a dark, shadowy corner somewhere," she wrote. "And on the flip side, many of our developers have never worked with journalists or in newsrooms." She cautioned both to stop viewing each other as "alien breeds," squandering the potential to create their best work together.

Building an integrated newsroom, she observed, "means building a culture where developers and writers can work together, in parallel, to solve a common problem and tell a story together. Have respect for one another." When I read that sentence I thought two things: 1) she was entirely right; 2) isn't it past time we need to say so?

This semester I heard a talk at the Kennedy School by Peter Hamby, Snapchat's news chief. As a political reporter at CNN, he once pitched a story about presidential candidate John Edwards' early use of Twitter. His editor responded: "Don't ever say the word Twitter in my presence again."



A Nicki Minaj profile in *The New York Times Magazine* offered unexpected lessons for the media

The story could end there, another anecdote about the failure of the management class to understand emerging technologies. But after the talk, I read a paper Hamby wrote as a Harvard Shorenstein fellow analyzing the use of Twitter during the last presidential campaign. What Hamby offered was a more nuanced description of what is gained and what is lost when old and new forms of reporting collide and journalists are not aligned. The chasm in so many news organizations was evidenced in these two quotes from campaign operatives:

In this corner: “To complain about the triviality of Twitter and glorify the golden era of journalism is ridiculous. For starters, there was no such thing. Letting a bunch of cranky old white men determine what they deigned worthy of the masses’ ears only served them and the ruling elites who were in on the joke.”

And in this corner: “Everything that lends itself to the free flow of unfiltered, unreflective, unedited information has eroded the quality of political reporting.”

Who is right? In some measure, both. It is now unimaginable that I would watch a political debate, or even a Patriots game, without Twitter as a companion. I like knowing what smart journalists and commentators know as soon as they know it. BuzzFeed’s

Ben Smith crushed the old rules in 2012 when, just 40 minutes into a presidential debate, he posted, “How Mitt Romney Won the First Debate.”

“Smith was only reporting what was obvious to any political junkie with half a brain,” Hamby wrote. “Obama was stumbling badly and quickly losing control of the narrative. Smith just didn’t feel the need for the bell to ring before posting his story. The judges of Twitter had already delivered their verdict.”

We’re unlikely to reverse that pattern, happily so for the admitted minority of Americans who consume live news that way.

But it is also true that much of the instant discourse is incremental and noisy. The late David Carr, *The New York Times*’s brilliant media critic, told Hamby: “I unfollowed a lot of political reporters because you are tweeting for your colleagues, you are not tweeting for me. I would say, put the phone in your pocket. Start focusing on the people that are in front of you.”

Carr was a rare bridge across worlds, the ink-stained reporter who held tight to the journalism of verification, but intoned that prescient line from “No Country for Old Men”: “You can’t stop what’s coming.” David understood the tensions innate to the shifting landscape in what still often feels like two-nation newsrooms.

At the Nieman Foundation, we annually assemble a class of fellows drawn from across the globe and an array of disciplines. Some come from the world’s largest news gathering enterprises, others from one-person start-ups. Some have never known a non-digital world, young enough to be the children of more experienced fellows. But

what strikes me every year is how much each generation craves the other’s knowledge.

In building this newsroom-like environment from scratch, we ask each fellow to take responsibility for defining the character of the class. What are their expectations of each other? What sort of culture will they build to allow them to do their best work?

Because so many fellows come from news organizations where questions of culture have long been settled, often at the top, my challenge to them is empowering. Taking responsibility for building something so important has spawned amazing partnerships. No one in these groups is just a columnist or podcaster or editor, but a collaborator responsible for learning what one doesn’t know and teaching what one does. In an industry where knowledge transfer is our job, we are often very poor about doing that in our own newsrooms.

In the past two years alone, our fellows have been promoted out of their Nieman year to become editor in chief of *El Mundo* in Madrid, digital editor in chief of *Le Monde* in Paris, leader of a Google innovation fund in France, director of business partnerships for ProPublica in New York, vice president for digital at Univision, and more. In each case, they carry a model for creative collaboration that I hope is making room for all the talent in their shops.

The story of Nicki Minaj is a small example of why hiring diversity and newsroom inclusion is material. But the stakes are existential if we consider the vast audiences we’ve yet to reach and the talents it will take to claim them. Someone you work with—or haven’t yet hired—knows something you need to know to succeed.

Many of Minaj’s lyrics wouldn’t make it past an editor but you can quote her on this: “We’re just getting started.” ■

(This column was adapted from a talk to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.)



Ann Marie Lipinski

Ann Marie Lipinski

What strikes me every year is how much each generation craves the other’s knowledge

“Give people the start of understanding” Melissa Bell, vice president of growth and analytics at Vox Media, on the company’s embrace of Snapchat, its spirit of collaboration, and its determination to create a better advertising experience

MELISSA BELL IS A JOURNALIST, technologist, and co-founder in 2014 of Vox.com, a site focused on explainer journalism. In 2015, she assumed a corporate role at parent company Vox Media. As vice president of growth and analytics, she oversees strategy not only for Vox.com but for tech sites Re|code and The Verge as well as sites that focus on sports, gaming, real estate, food, and fashion: SB Nation, Polygon, Curbed, Eater, and Racked. In October, Vox Media topped 60 million unique monthly visitors, according to comScore, not far off The New York Times digital site and Bell’s former employer, The Washington Post, where she was director of platforms. Bell spoke with Nieman Reports during a visit to the Nieman Foundation in December. Edited excerpts:

On Learning from Walt Disney

The benefit of building a brand that audiences recognize will, in the end, allow us to continue to build a strong revenue model and a strong connection to an audience. If they see us on Snapchat and Snapchat has a very large audience, then they get to know and trust Vox and see it as a source that they care about. If 10 percent of that

audience finds us on YouTube, five percent finds us on Facebook, and two percent finds us on Twitter, that’s great. There’s a revenue opportunity with Snapchat, and we can use that to support the journalism that we’re doing elsewhere. You have to think about your brand as an interconnected ethos that should exist in multiple places.

Walt Disney had an interesting idea about how his brands supported each other. The theme parks came from the movies; the movies came from his animations. The merchandise allowed for stores to be built. Some of the rides have become movies. Movies have influenced the rides. They all rely on each other. I think about that when I’m thinking about our newsroom.

Our Snapchat stories are inspired by the articles that we write on Vox.com. Our videos are inspired by the articles we run on Vox.com. Sometimes our videos are turned into graphics; sometimes the graphics are built into longer form pieces.

On Collaboration

There has to be a spirit of collaboration and a sense of shared responsibility at a media company. A writer who writes articles for Vox.com has to know that we also want

them to be an owner of our video success so that they are invested in that project just as much as they are in their own articles.

However, there also has to be some freedom and independence for these groups to do the work they need to do on the different platforms. Our Snapchat team is going to own the way we present news on Snapchat, and if they do a story that doesn’t exist anywhere else, that’s fine.

On Newsroom Diversity

Diversity has to be a recognized responsibility of everyone at the company. I feel very encouraged and excited about our work on diversity at Vox.com in particular and at Vox Media overall, because it wasn’t me just shouting into the wind. It is a true effort pushed by [Vox.com co-founders] Ezra Klein and Matt Yglesias, who are both white men. They made it as much of their responsibility as I felt like it was a responsibility of mine.

We’ve created a leadership team that is working on diversity at our company, and you need to have white men on that team. You need to have them invested in it. You need to have a constant conversation about this topic. There’s no moment that you can say, “All right, good job, we’ve succeeded, we’ve created an inclusive workplace and we’ve gotten some great talent in the door. We’re done.”

It matters every single day—in terms of how you’re thinking about career development and your internship program. It matters every single time you post a job listing. It matters in how you’re setting up meetings and how you’re thinking about whether or not you have the right people in the room.

On Building a Culture

People always go back to the fact that we are using a custom content management system called Chorus. This is going to sound a little Mr. Rogers-esque, but one of the things that has allowed us to do such great work is the culture that we’ve built and not so much the platform that we’ve built.

The platform is a great technology product, but it’s the team that’s doing the work



Vox.com co-founder Melissa Bell says a company's culture is more important than its technology

on it that matters most. It's also the ability to say we need to get this company to change quickly and to be on the same page about the direction.

We had to do this when the Facebook Instant Articles, Google Accelerated Mobile Pages, Apple News projects spun up; that was work that was not on our core platform. We had to say: This is something we're going to invest in. We had to be able to articulate that to 540 people.

Not everyone needs to know all of the details of why we're doing it, but the people who did need to know were able to make the shift, get the work done, and be fast about it. I think that is a benefit we have. I think that the high-quality design of our sites, for instance, is because we've created a rich culture of respect for design and valuing the visual representations.

Again, it all comes down to people pushing for a shared ownership. It's not just that we have a design group over in a corner that works on our design. It's that design is something that we all think about and care about deeply, and so it's able to affect all of our sites in a productive way.

On Improving the Ad Experience

I think ad blocking is a symptom of the larger disease of advertising in the digital space. In the past, we, as a media industry and as an online advertising industry, did a huge disservice to users by not creating a better advertising experience online.

We didn't try to innovate. This comes up with the constant conversation around

banner ads. The banner ad existed for 20 years with the only real iterations being, "How do we make it more annoying" not "How do we make it better." You got pop-outs and you got noise and takeovers and all of these things. That did a real disservice to us.

You see in other industries that there can be advertising-supported business models. You look at this with Vogue magazine, where there's some high-end beautiful advertising in the book. I think a lot of people who buy Vogue care about those ads; they don't feel like it distracts from the great journalism that Vogue does, but supports the 900-page September issue.

At Vox Media we are thinking about how to improve the advertising experience. We are also willing to risk losing some revenue on the chance that we can create a better experience. That is something that I think we really need to do in digital media. We're not going to solve this overnight.

On Snapchat

Allison Rockey, our director of programming at Vox.com, has inculcated in us the idea that you need to take the underlying ethos of what Vox.com is and create the storytelling format that is native to the platform.

There has to be a spirit of collaboration. However, there also has to be freedom for groups to do their work

When we work on Vox.com, we think about the longer story arc. What is the news? The news is never new; it's something that's been—there's context to it, there's history to it, there's a reason why we're at the place we're at today.

We need to be thoughtful about what are those bigger story arcs. That's one theme at Vox.com. Another theme is beautiful visuals, thoughtful, stunning graphs, and smart motion graphics. Another thing that we want to do, obviously, is explain.

When you take those three things together, the way that the team looked at Snapchat was: The Snapchat format is visual first, because it's on a small screen on your phone. It allows for sound, visuals, and text. Most users take a photograph and write text over it, or do a short film with text over it.

When our people started thinking about how to develop a format for Snapchat, they started to think about 10-second motion graphics with some text written on them. They decided to use Snapchat's swipe characteristic so you could tell a story through multiple swipes.

They also decided to tackle a bigger subject. One recent one was Islamophobia. There's a number of ways to cover or tell the story of Islamophobia in America. You could do it through a graph, or you can do it through a story around Donald Trump. You can get at it through different angles. Each Snap we think about is like a different angle of this larger topic.

When I read these Snapchat stories, I walk away with a deep understanding of the topic. I feel informed. What we're seeing from our readers is that they also feel that way and that they're excited about this. That, to me, is the key goal.

What I've always hoped that we could do is give people the start of understanding, so they'll be encouraged to discover more about it later on. Perhaps you look at the Islamophobia story on Snapchat and then you hear about it in a class or you see a news story about it. You have a basis of knowledge around it, so then you can start to participate in the conversation and learn more about it. I love to think about those stories as a gateway into knowledge. ■

Fast Times

Johanna van Eeden, NF '15, directs a South African news platform built to keep up with the speed of news

DECEMBER 3, 2015. WE ALL KNEW IT WAS going to be a busy day in the newsroom. The Supreme Court of Appeal in Bloemfontein, South Africa, was to rule on whether Oscar Pistorius was guilty of murder or not.

I remember the day Reeva Steenkamp was shot on February 14, 2013. At 8:03 a.m. this tweet from @Beeld_Nuus appeared on my BlackBerry: “Oscar Pistorius skiet sy vriendin in sy huis dood omdat hy glo dink sy is ‘n inbreker” (“Oscar Pistorius shoots

his girlfriend dead in his house after apparently thinking she’s a burglar”).

The news made international headlines, but it also created a huge shift in the culture of our newsrooms. This is what “digital first” was about. Beeld, one of Media24’s three daily Afrikaans newspapers, decided to tweet the news about Steenkamp’s death. It reached Beeld’s 29,000 Twitter followers, was translated into English by another journalist, and went viral.

More than two years later I was standing in a corridor at Media24 in Johannesburg, listening to a news editor talk about the golden question: What do we publish online and what new angles can we look at for tomorrow’s newspapers? We were prepared for Pistorius’ case in the Court of Appeal, but not for the tragic death of a mother and her two children. They were killed early that morning and the story developed at a fast pace. By lunchtime, the husband and father of the deceased admitted he had killed his family.

We had a lot of balls in the air, covering the Court of Appeal and staying with the family murder. It struck me how things had changed since that morning Steenkamp died. Beeld now has 140,000 followers on Twitter. We merged the websites of our three dailies (Beeld, Die Burger, and Volksblad) into one platform (Netwerk24.com) with a metered paywall. Netwerk24 has 116,000 followers on Twitter and the

A huge shift in our newsrooms started with a viral tweet

dailies combined have a Twitter audience of 234,000. And I eventually swapped my BlackBerry for a Samsung.

As part of a plan to strengthen our digital offerings, we shifted reporters and editors from our newsrooms to Netwerk24 in August 2015. We now work digital first in a way we could have never imagined on Valentine’s Day in 2013. On the print side we moved our three papers onto a single server in order to enable us to share national pages and other content in a more streamlined process, served by a single production team.

These are early but exciting days. I’m humbled by the team’s ability to adapt and innovate. I’ve come to appreciate the importance of constant communication as part of change management. I have no idea what our business will look like in five years. People keep asking me whether we will have newspapers. I think the answer is yes. What I don’t know is what they will look like. And maybe by that time I will have swapped my Samsung for a still-to-be designed wearable.

What I do know is that quality journalism and unique content will still form the backbone of what we do. ■

Fast-breaking stories such as the murder conviction of Olympic star Oscar Pistorius, below, prompted strategic change at South Africa’s Media24



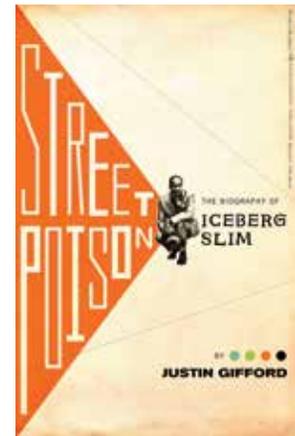
Mixing Media Culture critic Chris Vognar, NF '09, discovers new talents in a multimedia cross-disciplinary approach to his beat

SINCE MY RETURN TO THE DALLAS Morning News in 2009 following my fellowship year, I have been a culture critic. Trading in my old title of movie critic formalized my interdisciplinary impulses and gives me more room to roam, to generate story ideas that cross disciplines and to explore culture as a whole.

For example, I was captivated by “Street Poison,” Justin Gifford’s biography of Iceberg Slim, the influential pimp-turned-author. The book was widely reviewed by critics, and I could have joined in. Instead I became interested in writing a piece that examines the troubling glamorization of the pimp figure in movies, music, and television.

In addition to looking for fresh angles on cultural icons, I have embraced a multimedia life. I collaborate with a friend at the local NPR affiliate on a weekly film segment. I host the newspaper’s culture podcast, “Mixed Media.” I’m on Dallas’s NBC affiliate most Fridays talking about new movies. I curate and host a repertory film series in conjunction with the Dallas Film Society and I moderate an increasing number of author Q&A events.

I don’t write as many reviews as I once did. I have to pick my spots with more care. Yet I’m probably working harder than I ever



Moving beyond book reviews

have, and the excitement of the new keeps me energized.

My strategy has been to diversify and adapt. The rewards for thinking bigger have been substantial. I am more connected to my audience. I feel less than ever like some critical voice pontificating from on high. And I’m tapping an extroverted side I never knew I had. ■

HOME TRUTHS RAQUEL RUTLEDGE, NF '12, AND HER COLLEAGUES AT THE MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL INVESTIGATED UNFAIR PROPERTY TAX ASSESSMENTS— AND WORKED TO ENGAGE READERS

COEFFICIENTS OF dispersion. Chasing the sale. Maintenance years.

Three things I knew almost nothing about when I got a tip from a software engineer that something was gravely wrong with the property tax system in Wisconsin.

The tipster used those terms to explain that assessors statewide were violating the constitution by making adjustments to individual properties when they shouldn’t.

Seems like a somewhat simple concept. But how would we prove—or disprove—it and ultimately how would we show it? Who is to say whether a three-bedroom, two-bath ranch on Willow Street should be assessed at \$300,000 but the similar one across the street should be valued at \$275,000? What are all the factors that should be considered?

Like many things about which I end up investigating, I was not familiar with the details surrounding how values were set in Wisconsin other than that the 1,852 municipalities were each responsible for their own.

So I set out to learn how the system is supposed to work. I researched the policies, regulations, and history and interviewed assessors and former assessors, regulators, real estate brokers, and homeowners.

At every turn, I was keeping in mind the big questions: what documents

and records exist? How are the data kept? What data points might be relevant?

That’s where the coefficients of dispersion and other key measurements arose. Understanding the statistical measurement and other data about sales prices and values would be critical to showing what was happening.

Data reporter Kevin Crowe and I obtained databases from the state Department of Revenue, counties, cities, and municipalities and (after lots of cleaning and other magic by Kevin) began sorting and calculating.

We could soon see the worst offending assessors in the state. We could formulate an understanding of just how poor their work was and most importantly, what that meant to the tax-paying public.

We found dozens of communities where 20 percent or more of the property taxes were being paid by the wrong people.

We found municipalities hiring contract assessors who did cursory work. We discovered homeowners—unaware of the skewed system—paying far more than their “fair share.”

And we exposed a lax state oversight system with regulators and legislators failing to address the issue.

Perhaps the greatest challenge was presenting this information to readers in a way that would not trigger a sleep-induced coma. We tried to write simply, use graphics and charts, and—with the help of Allan James Vestal—we mapped every residential property in five counties so readers could see the impact on their properties and their neighborhoods.

Best of all, we included a two-minute video, produced by Bill Schulz, that summarized the issue cleanly, colorfully, and with a touch of humor. A definite plus when dealing with a complex and often dull topic such as property taxes. ■

Playing the News

News-based games have tremendous storytelling potential. So why aren't more news outlets making them?

BY ROSE EVELETH

YOU'RE LOOKING AT A MAP OF NEW YORK CITY WHEN A RED stick figure drops on the corner of Nostrand and Atlantic in Brooklyn. "Lauren is having a heart attack!" To save her, you must get her to the nearest hospital. But as you do, several more stick figures fall from the sky, calling for your attention. Some will live; some will die. By the end of the game, the bodies are falling faster than you can save them. "You saved 7 out of 26 lives, and 10 still need to get to a hospital."

This is HeartSaver, a game built in two days by developers and journalists from ProPublica at a hackathon organized by the Editors Lab at the Global Editors Network in New York in 2013. Using data from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, the game helps users better understand how the time it takes to get to a hospital can impact survival chances during a heart attack.



When the ProPublica team showed up at the hackathon, they first thought about simply building a tool that would let people plug in their addresses to find out how long it would take them to get to a hospital. But Sisi Wei, a journalist at ProPublica and one of the designers of HeartSaver, wanted to try something different. “How can we make this experience last longer than one input?” she wondered. “What can we do to help people understand the situation of folks who don’t live or work near them?” A newsgame was her answer.

Games are not new to journalism. Crossword puzzles have been a beloved part of newspapers for almost as long as there have been newspapers, and some of BuzzFeed’s most popular features are its quizzes and listicles, which can be substantive as well as trivial. The BuzzFeed News app, for example, offers a weekly quiz that tests readers’ knowledge of world events, and the company also just launched an app called QuizChat, which integrates with Facebook Messenger and allows users to take quizzes with their friends. Recently BuzzFeed launched a choose-your-own adventure game to help describe mental health issues in which players must navigate a day with depression. The Washington Post is experimenting with chat apps like Kik to create trivia games; The New York Times Magazine mailed its subscribers a cardboard headset so they could watch “The Displaced” documentary on the global refugee crisis in 3D; and in its recent ad for a deputy director of data visualization the Los Angeles Times listed “Unity or Unreal game engines,” which are used for games and virtual reality systems, under preferred job skills.

As digital technology allows more and more of our lives as consumers to be framed as play, scoring points or competing with others, companies of all kinds have been incorporating games into their strategies. Power suppliers rate your energy efficiency compared to other households in your neighborhood; health insurance companies encourage you to rack up points by exercising and staying active; Foursquare encourages users to regularly check into their favorite spots so they can “win” and be named the mayor.

For journalists, games offer compelling storytelling possibilities. They can simulate complex systems, where different choices create different outcomes. They can create a sense of emotion and urgency in players. And they can connect people with experiences they may never have in actual life. “Our job

as journalists is to inform the public,” says Wei. “By using emotion and empathy, games allow us to inform readers in a new way, one they both remember and understand.”

Despite the popularity of games—the Entertainment Software Rating Board states that 67 percent of American households play video games, and game sales now surpass movie box office receipts every year—and regular bursts of excitement around the ways games could help journalists tell stories, they’ve never quite taken off in journalism. Game design is hard, and it’s often time-consuming and expensive, taking resources away from other newsroom priorities. But as journalistic outlets seek to attract younger users—and audience engagement measures displace simpler metrics like unique visits and pageviews—games may present new opportunities to reach and retain audiences. “The norms by which audiences receive and appraise journalism are clearly changing,” says Maxwell Foxman, who authored a 2015 report on newsgames for the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University. “New media companies that have a news focus can be more flexible, because they’re not trying to fit games into the traditional news structure.”

ACTIVIST ORGANIZATIONS, which don’t have a traditional news structure but, like newsrooms, do have missions to inform the public, are using games to powerful effect. In his Tow report, Foxman cites *Darfur is Dying*, a joint project released in 2006 by mtvU, MTV’s university channel, the Reebok Human Rights Foundation, and the International Crisis Group, as an outstanding example of the genre. *Darfur is Dying* is a relatively simple, Flash-based game that asks players to pick a role in a displaced Darfuri family: mother, father, or one of six children between the ages of 10 and 14. Then players go through the basic tasks required to survive in a refugee camp—forge for food, find water—all while militias periodically roll through to attack the camp. Last year, independent game developer Lucas Pope won a slew of awards, including a Video Game Award from the British Academy of Film and Television Arts, for *Papers, Please*, in which players take on the role of an immigration officer working the border of a fictional country called Arstotzka in 1982.

A game about Somali pirates made an abstract topic personal for Wired readers

In 2011, game design consultancy Antidote Games developed *Broken Cities* for the Nordic Council for Climate Change as an educational tool for climate scientists, many of whom expressed confusion and frustration as to why the public wasn’t doing more to stop climate change. The game’s challenge: Build a new city in Scandinavia, balancing development priorities with environmental concerns, kind of like a simplified *SimCity* with a sustainability bent. When the climate researchers had to decide between building low-cost, environmentally unfriendly housing and costlier green housing, “many of them did the dodgy, unethical stuff that people in the real world did,” according to Antidote Games co-founder Ida Benedetto. As a result, they better grasped the motivations of those whose behavior they previously didn’t understand. “News isn’t just about conveying information,” says Benedetto. “It’s about getting people to understand a situation, and I can’t think of any better way to do that than by dropping them into a situation and having them figure it out.”

“Games are models,” says Ian Bogost, game designer and, with Simon Ferrari and Bobby Schweizer, author of *Newsgames: Journalism at Play*. “They represent systems within systems, so you can depict the complex machinery of the world in a complex way.” Trouble is, games are also complex to make, and that has often been an obstacle to wider uptake of this storytelling genre.

Shannon Perkins, editor of interactive technologies at *Wired*, built *Cutthroat Capitalism: The Game* as an accompaniment to a piece in the July 2009 issue of the magazine on the economics of being a Somali pirate. In the game, you’re a pirate commander, sailing around the Gulf of Aden. You’ve been given \$50,000 from your tribal leaders and a handful of other inves-



3D technology, like that used in “The Displaced,” a documentary about the global refugee crisis, brings a game-like experience to news stories

tors. As you sail, you have to choose which ships to attack, and how to negotiate ransom from those ships. When you seize a ship, you learn how large the crew is, its ethnic makeup, the type of boat and the value of what it’s carrying. As you negotiate, you can feed your captives or kill them.

For Perkins, the game was an interesting way to explore morality and to personalize a topic the vast majority of Wired’s readers would never actually encounter. “There were some rules but there were also some things where you would look inside yourself as a human being: How do you feel about

that?” Perkins says. It was also an experiment, done after hours. From conception to release, Perkins had eight weeks to put the game together, on top of his other duties of getting the magazine online. He was up almost every night. His girlfriend even moved out. Luckily, the game did well, staying in the top 100 articles for over a year. Other games were less successful, and Perkins started to feel disillusioned, eventually leaving Wired to pursue his own projects.

Perkins’s frustration is common for those trying to make games in newsrooms. Games take a long time to create. They

require testing and iterations. And their development doesn’t necessarily sync up with the news cycle. Even the language of game design studios and newsrooms is different. Foxman cites the word “failure” as a case in point: “Game designers expect failure, whereas obviously the idea of failure is an incredibly big deal in journalism. It means that you got something wrong. That becomes problematic when you put those two people in a room together.”

Plus, Foxman argues, newsroom culture has not traditionally been comfortable with ideas of play. In his Tow report, Foxman

wrote about Retha Hill, director of the Cronkite School's New Media Innovation and Entrepreneurship Lab at Arizona State University, who said only 5 to 10 percent of her journalism students said they played games at all, in contrast to the general population of people their age, of whom about 30 percent play games. At The New York Times, Sam Dolnick, an associate editor, said he's convinced the publication's first virtual reality product, generally seen as a game-like medium, had to be substantive and serious. "We don't see this as a gimmick, and we didn't want readers to dismiss it that way," Dolnick says.

Some journalism schools are integrating game design into their curricula, including the New Media Innovation and Entrepreneurship Lab that Hill runs, Arizona State's Center for Games and Impact, and Northeastern University's School of Journalism's Media Innovation Program, where one concentration is game design. Northeastern students recently partnered with Esquire to come up with new ways to retell a 2011 feature in which journalist Luke Dittrich walked the entire 1,933-mile border between the United States and Mexico. One of the proposals was a game, in which the user controlled an animated Dittrich figure. As the players moved along the trail, they were faced with choices about where to pitch a tent, whether to explore a mountain range, or whether to talk to a border guard or not.

Even at places ready to experiment, like BuzzFeed, the relationship between game designers and the rest of the editorial team is still in flux. Foxman devoted a chapter of his Tow report to the BuzzFeed games team, but that team has since been disbanded and its members dispersed around BuzzFeed, some on the editorial side and some of the advertising side. BuzzFeed's latest game endeavor: a Puzzles section full of non-news-related crosswords.

The Washington Post recently launched a collaboration with mobile messaging app Kik, in which Post journalists use Kik to create trivia bots with which users can actually converse. In a geography quiz, for example, the bot might offer a multiple-choice question about the tallest mountain in the world. If the user says the correct answer (Everest), the bot sends a link to a Post story about Everest. Winning users also receive rewards, such as a NCAA March Madness emoji or "Game of Thrones" illustrations.



Fusion's Fertile Ground, about an unintended pregnancy, was written not by a game designer

"Kik jumped out at us because it gave us the flexibility of building something fun and informative for a young audience," says Ryan Kellett, audience and engagement editor at the Post. "We've learned a lot about structuring the experience to invite users to move the game forward themselves instead of us delivering everything we have at once."

Marcus Bösch, who runs a small game design studio called The Good Evil in Cologne, Germany, has found a way to make even

more ambitious newsgames work. With clients like the "Heute-Show," a German version of "The Daily Show," he develops games around current topics in the news, and says he can deliver a browser-based game in five days, at a cost of \$7,000 to \$10,000.

The Good Evil's most recent game for "Heute-Show" had to do with metadata—the digital information created every time you make a call, send an e-mail or click on a website. It was based on the old pre-smartphone game Snake, in which players navigated a "snake" around the screen to devour little blocks. In the new game, players maneuver a chomping face over floppy disks, Twitter icons, and phones, which then follow the face around the screen, showing how metadata from tweets, phone calls, and Web surfing pursues them around the Internet. The game took about two weeks to make, and Bösch says the "Heute-Show" digital team has decided to explore more interactive formats.

News outlets don't need a whole game design studio to make something game-like, though. In February, Fusion released Fertile Ground, "an interactive journey through an unintended pregnancy" that takes readers

The sense of control and choice a game player experiences can be a powerful vehicle for learning



The culture of game designers is one that accepts the need for failures and iterations

in chief of The New York Times Magazine. A week after the ISIS attacks in Paris, the paper produced a virtual reality film from footage of candlelight vigils in the city.

According to Foxman, one reason newsrooms might be discouraged from creating games is, in fact, the focus on blockbusters. Not every title has the resources of The New York Times to put behind a game, but many could instead develop smaller projects and try to make their organizations more playful as a whole. “Rather than looking for a specific news game, injecting play into what might be considered more traditional news packages is an interesting and beneficial step to getting on this path to newsgames,” he says.

At that 2013 hackathon where ProPublica first developed HeartSaver, newsrooms came up with other interesting games—The Wall Street Journal proposed Helicopter Ben (“It’s 2007, the economy is out of control, and you’re Ben Bernanke. Hang on to your hat as you ride the Dow and use all the tools at the Fed’s disposal to save American workers from losing their jobs”), Digital First Media created The Waffler, where players are put in the shoes of a politician trying to answer questions about their position in a campaign, The Associated Press made a magnetic poetry-style app from which players could rearrange words from AP headlines and vote on their favorites.

None of those games was actually published, but at ProPublica, editors gave Wei and her team time at work to polish up the code and publish HeartSaver on the site. Now, Wei is working on a new game, the nature of which is still under wraps, to come out in 2016. And she has serious ambitions for the new game, and for newsgames as a whole: “I want to prove to the entire industry that games can be a path for journalists to use to teach things that are engaging in a different way.” ■

but by an author of interactive books, in which readers’ choices influence the unfolding plot

through the options available to a young South Dakota woman. The game is simple: Choose what to do as the options appear. Do you stay with the child’s father, whom you barely know, or go it alone? Do you take the 7.5-hour bus ride to the abortion clinic that can see you soon, or do you wait 20 weeks to be seen at the clinic closer to you? Accompanied by watercolor illustrations, the game conveys an increasing sense of despair and isolation as none of the options seem to be good ones.

Fertile Ground was written not by a game designer, but by an author. Sara James Mnookin had published several interactive books, in which readers’ choices influence the unfolding plot. She told Felix Salmon, who at the time worked at Reuters, about one of those books, and when Salmon moved to Fusion, he got in touch about doing a similar story for the site. Mnookin and the Fusion Interactive Team put the piece together over the course of nearly three months. “I am looking forward to Fusion exploring new and interesting forms of journalism,” Salmon says of Fertile Ground. “Fusion absolutely stands for experimenting with different forms of storytelling.”

THE NEW YORK TIMES’S Dolnick regards “The Displaced” project as a virtual reality version of an interactive story. “There’s a way to watch this where every time is different,” he says. One of the scenes in the documentary is of a food drop in South Sudan, where people run toward white bags dropped into a field from above. Viewers can watch that scene and focus on a different person every time—a mother running to get food for her children, for example—and as a result, each viewing feels different. “That’s an incredibly exciting storytelling device,” Dolnick says. “In traditional journalism we make the decision for you, and you have no choice. Here, we’re giving the viewer back that choice, and that’s a really exciting and empowering development.”

It’s a costly and time-consuming development, too, and one not many news organizations can afford. Going forward, The Times plans to apply the virtual reality experience to a wide range of subjects. “We think that more quick return stuff that can more quickly report the news is definitely in our future,” says Jake Silverstein, editor

NÃO QUERO
A BARRAGEM
DE
BELO MONTE



*Many Brazilians
oppose construction
of the massive Belo
Monte hydroelectric
dam in the nation's
Amazon region*



COVERING THE
WATERFRONT

Despite a
fraught political
and economic
environment,
entrepreneurial
Brazilian
journalists are
striving
to revitalize
coverage

BY FABIANO
MAISONNAVE



IT IS ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE TO overestimate the importance of the Amazon basin to Brazil. At approximately five million square kilometers, the region represents 59 percent of the country's territory, an area just over 10 times larger than California. The most diverse rainforest in the world borders seven countries, three of which supply a majority of the world's cocaine.

About 25 million people live in ever widening swaths of deforested areas. Some are newly arrived workers attracted by infrastructure projects, such as Belo Monte, the third largest hydroelectric dam in the world. Others are members of indigenous tribes who have had little or no contact with Western culture.

There are endless stories to be told in the Amazon—from climate change to the ongoing loss of indigenous cultures—but fewer and fewer media outlets still have the budgets for the flights, cars, and boats needed to reach and report in such remote areas. It is harder still to find the cash to maintain a permanent presence. In April, *Folha de S.Paulo*, the most influential newspaper in Brazil, closed its last bureau in the Amazon. (Disclosure: I am a senior reporter at the paper.) Twenty years ago, it had three bureaus in the region. The other main national newspapers, *O Globo* in Rio de Janeiro and *O Estado de S. Paulo*, closed their offices in the past few years, as did *Veja*, the country's largest weekly newsmagazine.

The retreat of mainstream print media as it transitions to digital has not only impacted coverage of the Amazon but also beats as diverse as soccer and books. Brazilian journalism faces the same problems the industry does in the rest of the world—including declining ad revenue—and greater ones, as well. In 2015, six journalists were killed for their work, the third most of any country tracked by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). CPJ's Carlos Lauria says attacks on journalists in Brazil have increased in the last five years, especially on

independent journalists covering crime and politics outside of major cities.

Despite this, and the country's fraught political and economic climate, entrepreneurial Brazilian journalists are striving to revitalize and reinvent the profession. Dozens of journalists are leaving traditional newsrooms and creating new niche media start-ups online, including *Amazônia Real*, working to report stories in the Amazon that legacy media aren't; *Brio*, specializing in long-form narratives, and its sister publication *Jota*, focused on the Brazilian judiciary system; *Ponte*, covering mostly public security, human rights, and justice; *Aos Fatos*, a fact-checking platform; and *Agência Pública*, a news agency focused on investigative reporting on issues such as the impact of the Olympic Games preparations.

"These organizations are not focused on profit but rather are committed to producing quality journalism and to finding new forms of financing it," says Natália Viana, one of three female journalists who founded *Agência Pública* in 2011. "The result is deeper, less hard news-based journalism. It is more personalized and open to experimentation."

Many of these start-ups gained more visibility in 2013, when people took over the streets of major Brazilian cities to protest bus fare hikes. Unexpectedly, the size of the demonstrations grew and so did the range of issues, encompassing corruption, bias in corporate media, and police violence. The protests symbolized the end of a period of economic growth and optimism, when Brazil seemed poised to be "the China of Latin America." Since then Brazilians have suffered a sharp economic slowdown. In the third quarter of 2015, the world's eighth largest economy shrank by 4.5 percent, the largest reduction since Brazil began measuring GDP by the current system in 1996. Many now wonder whether Brazil will become the next Greece.

Part of the economic crisis is attributed to a major corruption scandal in state oil company *Petrobras*. The investigation has affected all major political parties, especially

the ruling Workers' Party and President Dilma Rousseff, who chaired the *Petrobras* board from 2003 until she assumed office in 2010. In early December, Eduardo Cunha, the president of Brazil's lower house of Congress who is also linked to the scheme, opened an impeachment procedure against Rousseff. The result has been a standoff, with each accusing the other of corruption.

During 2013's electrifying marches "against everything," as many people called them at the time, real-time coverage from citizens and activists using Twitter, TwitCasting, and other social media made a major impact. These emerging forms of coverage—practiced most prominently by *Mídia Ninja*, a Portuguese acronym for Independent Narratives, Journalism and Action—thrive due to better access to protest organizers and the public's distrust of legacy media. *Ninja* has had less impact after one of its founders, journalist Bruno Torturra, left to create a new digital media initiative called *Fluxo*, but its early success highlighted the limits of traditional outlets and the possibilities for innovation.

One of the initiatives born during that crucial year is *Amazônia Real*, a site trying to build an editorial presence in the Amazon—from scratch. The news website monitors the largest rainforest in the world from a three-desk office above a neo-Pentecostal church in a traditional neighborhood of Manaus, the main city in the northwestern section of the Amazon. Focusing on covering the environment and the isolated communities of the Amazon, *Amazônia Real* has a small but growing network of contributors, including about a dozen reporters and columnists, among them the American scientist and Nobel laureate Philip Fearnside, a professor at the Brazilian government's National Institute for Research in the Amazon and an expert on global warming.

"The idea is to publish news about the Amazon ignored by the local and national press, lending voice to distant populations," says Katia Brasil, who started the website after losing her job at *Folha de S.Paulo* in one



Members of the Munduruku tribe await a flight to Brasilia, Brazil's capital, to talk to government officials about the Belo Monte dam

of the waves of layoffs occurring at Brazil's top print publications. "At *Amazônia Real*, narratives begin with the characters. The characters lead us to investigate the issues," says co-founder Elaíze Farias, a former senior reporter with local newspaper *A Crítica*.

One recent story chronicled the daily lives of four Juma, the sole remaining members of this ancient ethnic group that had a population of some 15,000 in the 18th century. Since then, the Juma have declined as the result of decades of conflict with rubber plant and chestnut tree growers, who have sought more and more land for their crops. The Juma seem doomed, as the only survivors are 80-year-old Aruká and his three daughters, who married men from another ethnicity.

In 2014, Brasil and freelance photographer Odair Leal made about a 1,370-mile round-trip from Manaus by plane, car, and boat to report the story. The result is a sad account in both text and video about Aruká, who cannot talk to his grandchildren because they didn't learn the Juma language. Living in quasi-isolation, the Juma appear trapped between the traditional life of subsistence agriculture and fishing and a desire for modernization, such as formal education and electricity, while still facing pressure from lumbermen, fishermen, and hunters looking to use their land.

In October, *Amazônia Real* was the first media outlet to report on the link between the smoke that covered Manaus for several days and fires from nearby forests, disputing the official explanation from the regional government, which blamed the neighboring state of Pará. Gradually, the local press stopped quoting the regional government sources and started to use the scientific evidence reported by *Amazônia Real*.

Start-ups such as *Amazônia Real*—and many in the mainstream media—face an increasing challenge from powerful conglomerate Grupo Globo. It is the third fastest-growing media company in the world, with revenue in 2014 reaching about \$7 billion, according to ZenithOptimedia. Globo maintains a national network of 118 local TV

affiliates, owns the national O Globo newspaper, the weekly newsmagazine *Época*, the CBN national news radio network, and 24-hour channel GloboNews. The Economist, which has called Globo "Brazil's most powerful company," reported in 2014 that 91 million people—slightly less than half the population—tune into TV Globo every day. In the U.S., that sort of audience is only seen once a year, during the Super Bowl.

Recent data shows that more advertising revenue is migrating to Globo. "Increasingly, Brazil's advertising market will be a contest between the two Gs: Globo and Google," predicted The Economist.

In 2006, Globo launched G1, the most visited news site in Brazil, with some 25.2 million unique visitors a month. In comparison, Brio reports that it had just over 65,000 unique visitors during its first four months, while *Amazônia Real* says it averages around 50,000 unique visitors per month. In partnership with local TV affiliates, G1 maintains 57 newsrooms throughout the country, each one with its own regional news site.

No other media outlet in Brazil comes close to having Globo's reach, but its ownership structure throws up conflicts of interest. This is especially true outside the major urban centers, where affiliates usually are

BRAZIL'S GRUPO GLOBO IS THE THIRD FASTEST-GROWING MEDIA COMPANY IN THE WORLD

owned by politicians or well-connected businessmen. For instance, the families of two former presidents, José Sarney and Fernando Collor, control local Globo affiliates in their impoverished home states.

Meanwhile, foreign media outlets like BuzzFeed, Vice, The Huffington Post, and Spain's El País have encroached on Brazil's digital landscape, one of the world's largest online markets. BuzzFeed Brasil, which launched in October 2013 with translated content and is now operated by a local team producing original material, is BuzzFeed's third largest site after the U.S. and U.K. Currently, the site focuses on social rather than hard news, but that may soon change. BuzzFeed recently listed an opening for a news editor at the site's São Paulo office. The job qualifications include experience in large newsrooms, dealing with breaking news, and familiarity with Brazilian law.

Despite massive competition from legacy media and foreign-born initiatives, some niche start-ups feel they can offer an alternative—or at least a supplement—to content available elsewhere, an important shift in the journalism ecosystem. Brazil's news media "is transitioning to a more fragmented landscape, but I won't be naïve to think it means traditional outlets will lose their relevance," says Tai Nalon, a former political reporter for Folha de S.Paulo and co-founder of the fact-checking start-up Aos Fatos. These new outlets "cover a niche in the best way possible, something mainstream media never did."

Nalon launched Aos Fatos ("The Facts") this past summer, in the hope of reshaping political coverage in the country. Though national political coverage is dynamic and widespread, with major media outlets committed to balance and accuracy, state and

local news outlets are often heavily dependent on government funding. This, coupled with the number of politician-owned media companies located outside the major cities, means many smaller outlets are susceptible to biased coverage.

Aos Fatos's biggest story to date came after embattled President Rousseff, in an August interview with three of Brazil's major newspapers, stated that the government was unaware of the severity of the country's mounting economic crisis until well into 2014. After fact-checking the president's remarks, Aos Fatos demonstrated that the official economic figures started to deteriorate several months before Rousseff officially acknowledged the problem and the government's own analysis was predicting a downturn as early as December 2013.

With a steadily growing following on social media, Aos Fatos has proven it can

The Belo Monte dam being built in the Amazon, home to the world's most diverse rainforest, has aroused concern about its environmental impact



attract an audience. Attracting funding, though, is another matter. “Scarce venture capital is the main obstacle,” says Nalon. “We don’t have a thriving ecosystem of foundations to support the emerging scene of independent media organizations. Most newspapers and magazines rely on income from a few companies or the government.” That’s why Nalon is depending on crowdfunding from readers to support her venture.

Aos Fatos’s business model, while common elsewhere, is unfamiliar in Brazil, which lacks a philanthropic tradition, according to Brazilian journalist Rosental Alves, professor of journalism at the University of Texas at Austin and director of the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas. “There is some hope for nonprofit journalism,” he says. “The business of legacy journalism is shrinking so much that nonprofits can be created and be sustainable.”

NONPROFITS LIKE AGÊNCIA Pública depend on funding from organizations such as the Ford Foundation, Open Society Foundations, and the Omidyar Network. Ford also is the main source of funding for Amazônia Real, whose initial revenue model—ad sales to companies with green agendas—failed. However, Katia Brasil knows that depending on grants is not a long-term strategy. Achieving financial sustainability remains their greatest challenge. “The best business model for independent journalism would be revenue from readers, but not through a paywall,” says Brasil. “It should come from donations with free and democratic access. We are preparing our first crowdfunding effort in order to have this experience with the reader.”

Other start-ups with nontraditional funding models include two co-founded by Felipe Seligman, who in 2013 left his job as a justice reporter with Folha de S.Paulo to start Brio, a Brasilia-based site that publishes long, intensively reported multimedia narratives, and its sister publication, Jota, focused on the Brazilian judiciary system. “I sensed the profession was going through a transitional moment,” Seligman says of his decision to launch his own ventures, “and that many colleagues would like to get involved in interesting models of journalism.”

Along with partners who have long experience in traditional newsrooms, Seligman first launched Jota, aimed at the nearly

1 million lawyers, judges, and prosecutors that deal with more than 95 million lawsuits nationwide. “I noticed a big dissatisfaction among lawyers regarding access to justice information,” he says. “They always complained that [journalists] gathered much more information than them.” Jota says it has a little over 1,000 subscribers, who either pay \$5 a month or an annual fee of \$50. The website also offers products on demand, modeled after The Economist Intelligence Unit. The growing popularity of the service indicates how providing must-read information to niche audiences for a fee could be a sustainable path for certain publications.

Then, last May, Seligman and his partners launched Brio, which plans to publish one long-form narrative story per month. Brio initially experimented with its own publishing platform but is now posting all of its articles on the free site Medium. When the site launched, Seligman’s co-founder, Fernando Mello, another former Folha reporter, outlined Brio’s mission in a Medium post: “Brio commits to make life easier for journalists during the creative process, by way of expense advances, rigorous research and editing process, translation to English and Portuguese and marketing and PR campaigns created in-house, specifically for each story.”

Brio’s stories have so far ranged from a consideration of who will succeed the current Dalai Lama to an exploration of the legacy of the military dictatorship that ruled Brazil from 1964 to 1985. The piece that has garnered the most attention has been reporter Matheus Leitão’s personal account of his search for the man who informed on his parents, former Communist Party militants. In the 1970s, the couple was arrested and tortured at the behest of the country’s military dictatorship.

The first-person narrative begins when 12-year-old Leitão learns that in 1972 his parents, Marcelo Netto and Miriam Leitão, then undergrads and now journalists, had been jailed for their militancy as part of the Brazilian Communist Party. Nineteen years old and pregnant with Matheus’ older brother, Miriam Leitão was locked in a dark room with a 110-pound snake and beaten by the guard. Netto was repeatedly beaten and spent nine months in solitary confinement.

The person who informed on them is Foedes dos Santos. A communist leader in the southeastern state of Espírito Santo, he also had been arrested and, under torture, named some 20 other students as well as a Communist Party member, who died in

FACT-CHECKING START-UP AOS FATOS IS RESHAPING POLITICAL COVERAGE IN BRAZIL

jail. He then cut all ties with his former colleagues and vanished. After several years of research, Matheus Leitão found dos Santos living with his son in a remote rural area, 42 years after his disappearance.

The multimedia piece received hundreds of comments on Brio’s site and via social media and was covered by several other outlets. Leitão also signed a contract to write a book about his quest. “I had never gotten so much feedback,” says Leitão, a former Folha reporter and now a political blogger with G1 and Época. Brio’s platform “matched perfectly” the way he wanted to tell the story, he says. “There are new formats that allow a certain kind of freedom that the big media outlets have not found yet.”

Despite the promise of these new start-ups, Eliane Brum, a columnist for El País’s international edition and a documentary filmmaker who often reports on human rights issues, doesn’t think they are up to the task of reporting on the country’s complexities. The mainstream media haven’t lived up to their role in a democracy, she argues, but neither have these new initiatives completely filled the demand for in-depth reporting and new narrative forms. “My great concern is that such a fascinating period of Brazilian history has been told in a very precarious way or even not told at all,” Brum says, “as there is too little reporting and enormous parts that have been made invisible. There is no media outlet, large or small, that can be considered truly national in the sense of daily coverage of the various countries inside Brazil.”

Still, Seligman, for one, is encouraged by what his and other niche titles have accomplished so far. “There is a wealth of stories and a lot of good people to write for us,” he says. “The challenge now is to attract readers’ interest.” ■

With reporting by Eryn M. Carlson

How newsrooms are moving beyond the “coming out” story to report crucial transgender issues

BY SARA MORRISON

Covering the Transgender Community

SARAH L. VOISIN/THE WASHINGTON POST VIA GETTY IMAGES

*The Washington Post
published a profile
of Sara Simone,
a transgender woman
who works at a
nonprofit that helps
homeless veterans*





IN MARCH OF 2014, JORGE RIVAS, FUSION'S national affairs correspondent, was working on a story about undocumented immigrants when he heard about a transgender woman being held in a men's detention center. "She was stuck in a detention center surrounded by men, often experiencing the same type of harassment she was fleeing in the first place," Rivas says.

Rivas told investigative reporter Cristina Costantini, his co-writer on the story, what he'd heard. It sounded familiar. Their colleague, Kristofer Ríos, recently told Costantini he had heard similar things about transgender detainees during his own immigration reporting. The three teamed up for a six-month investigation into the treatment of transgender people in Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention centers. "Why Did the U.S. Lock Up These Women With Men?" was the headline. The story received an award for outstanding digital journalism from GLAAD (formerly the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation), and, in June of 2015, ICE announced it would implement new guidelines for transgender detainees.

This past year has been a watershed for media coverage of transgender issues. In 2014, ESPN's Grantland

was sharply criticized for a piece that outed a transgender woman and may have contributed to her suicide, while talk show hosts Katie Couric and Piers Morgan were derided for insensitivity toward transgender guests on their respective programs.

In 2015, in contrast, ABC News produced a deeply researched, widely praised educational special in which Caitlyn Jenner came out as transgender. The Washington Post profiled a transgender woman who until recently had been out of work and homeless. In a story focused on a transgender man who is Muslim, the Los Angeles Times looked at conflicts between an individual's religion and gender identity. And in a series of editorials The New York Times called for changes in the treatment of transgender people and invited the transgender community to tell its own stories on



the Times website. In May, VIDA: Women in Literary Arts announced that it would include statistics on the number of articles written by LBTQI (lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex) writers and writers with disabilities in its next annual VIDA Count of bylines in literary publications.

Transgender people—models, actors, musicians, authors, athletes, a former Army soldier serving time for espionage—have increasingly entered the public consciousness. With this increased visibility has come increased media coverage. Kris Hayashi, executive director of the Transgender Law Center in the San Francisco Bay Area, remembers how when he came out as transgender in the late 1990s there was very little to be found in the mainstream media about people like him. Now, he says, the transgender community is covered with a frequency that was “unimaginable” even three years ago.

Says Meredith Talusan, who in 2015 became BuzzFeed’s first openly transgender staff writer and covers transgender issues for the website, “Now, it’s actually possible to gain knowledge about trans issues from mainstream media sources. More of those sources have been willing to respect the ways in which trans people want to be addressed and portrayed, though there’s still a lot to be done.”

Despite this progress, the general population still knows relatively little about the transgender community. In a recent survey by the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), the largest LGBT civil rights organization in

the U.S., only 22 percent of respondents said they knew a transgender person. This lack of knowledge, combined with the rapid rise in visibility for transgender people, has created unique challenges for newsrooms. Very few newsrooms have any openly transgender staffers.

How do journalists cover a community, which has been for so long maligned and voiceless, in ways that are considerate of that community’s needs as well as those of readers, some of whom need basic concepts explained? Most coverage to date has tended to focus on one transgender person’s pre-transition life and gender reassignment surgery, while rarely reporting on the wider transgender community. Stories have also often used terminology and pronouns that were objectionable to the transgender person. Reporters writing about the transgender community, for which violence and discrimination are major concerns, have to educate themselves about terminology and spend extra time building the rapport that can lead to nuanced coverage.

That was certainly the case with the Fusion investigation of transgender detainees in federal immigration facilities. Rivas and his Fusion colleagues needed to talk to transgender people, some of whom were victims of sexual assault, whose shaky immigration statuses landed them in ICE detention centers. Any of these three factors on its own could make a source wary of going public. In addition, the Fusion reporters needed people who were willing to tell their stories on camera. Apart from the reporting challenges, Rivas says, the team wondered how much readers who weren’t transgender

Sara Simone hugs a friend who provided shelter when she was homeless

This past year has been a watershed for media coverage of transgender issues

would care about their subjects, members of a long-stigmatized community.

Before Rivas could meet with Barbra Perez, a transgender detainee featured in his Fusion piece, he met with Olga Tomchin, whose work at the Transgender Law Center focused on advocating for transgender people in immigration detention. The process of developing a relationship with a source or a source's representative wasn't different from any other story except for one thing: Tomchin asked if Rivas was going to film any of the transgender sources putting on makeup. Tomchin explained that this trope in coverage of transgender women is widely considered a superficial demonstration of femaleness to which cisgender women are rarely subjected. Rivas hadn't intended to shoot that kind of footage, but learning that it was considered a cliché was "a lesson" for him. "We do try very hard to avoid putting our clients in situations where they feel exploited by media or that their story was manipulated," says Jill Marcellus, senior communications manager at the Transgender Law Center.

More and more reporters are educating themselves on how to adequately cover transgender people. Couric and Morgan drew criticism for lines of questioning perceived as insensitive. Both Couric, who interviewed actress Laverne Cox and model Carmen Carrera, and Morgan, who interviewed writer Janet Mock, asked about their guests' genitals, questions many transgender individuals and advocates regard as an invasion of

privacy. "People ask trans people all the time, 'So, have you had the surgery?'" says Dawn Ennis, a news editor at The Advocate, the oldest LGBT-interest magazine in the U.S., who is transgender. "People are curious about it because it's so unusual, but it really is a violation of people's privacy to ask those questions."

Couric responded to the subsequent backlash by inviting Cox back on her ABC show to discuss what she had done wrong, saying she'd now have to hold up her show as an example of how not to report on transgender people. Morgan invited Mock back on his show for a contentious interview in which he demanded to know why he'd been "viciously abused" on social media by the transgender community after he said he had shown support for transgender people by promoting Mock's book and calling her a woman.

After the Fusion reporters won the trust of Tomchin, the Transgender Law Center representative, they had to win the trust of the women they wanted to profile. Johanna Vasquez's story was probably the hardest to tell. After being brutally sexually assaulted in her native El Salvador, she fled to America. But she was beaten by her male cellmate in an ICE detention center and then locked in solitary confinement for seven months because guards didn't know where else to put her. Rivas and Costantini say they met with her several times without a camera or even a notebook so they could establish the level of trust Vasquez needed to tell her story.

Journalists are learning which lines of questioning transgender people might consider a violation of privacy

Kristin Beck, a transgender former Navy SEAL, shares images from her past during a talk at an FBI office in Clarksburg, West Virginia



ASSOCIATED PRESS/FBI

The Fusion team also needed data to show the scope of the problem. While a Government Accountability Office report stated that from October 2009 to May 2013, three of the 15 victims in cases of “substantiated allegation of sexual abuse” in ICE detention were transgender, ICE told the journalists it didn’t have a count of the total transgender detainee population.

Costantini consulted with the Williams Institute at the UCLA School of Law, a think tank that researches LGBT law, public policy, and demographics, and has produced transgender population estimates. The Williams Institute’s oft-cited number puts America’s transgender population at nearly 700,000, but this is largely based on surveys from two states: Massachusetts and California. Gender identity is rarely included on official forms from which this kind of data is usually drawn.



DETERMINING STATISTICS ON violence perpetrated against transgender people—a very real concern in the community, especially for women of color—is similarly difficult. Most states don’t require that crimes based on gender

identity be reported as hate crimes, and the police may simply report victims as whatever sex and the gender identity that traditionally accompanies it is on their legal IDs, which may not be accurate. This is also a problem when it comes to reporting on violence against transgender people; journalists may rely on police reports that refer to the pre-transition gender expression of the victim. “There’s still a ton of misgendering, often of victims of violence, which is particularly awful,” says BuzzFeed’s Talusan.

GLAAD has recommendations for how the media should cover transgender victims of violence, including referring to them by the name and pronouns consistent with how they identified at the time of the incident, and refraining from salacious and unnecessary details about the victim’s appearance or gender identity. “In major cities, we’ve seen a lot of growth in terms of media understanding and ability to think beyond just what the plain old police report says,” according to The Advocate’s Ennis.

A big uptick in stories about transgender people occurred after April 2015, when Caitlyn Jenner came out as transgender in a two-hour special on ABC’s “20/20.” ABC News producer Sean Dooley says the show was a unique opportunity not just to tell Jenner’s story, but also to educate a largely uninformed television audience, some of whom wouldn’t normally watch a special about a transgender person but watched this one because of Jenner’s fame as an Olympic athlete or reality show star.

Dooley says ABC News spoke with several advocacy groups and experts, including GLAAD and the National Center for Transgender Equality, to prepare for the special. Susan Stryker, an associate professor of gender and women’s studies at the University of Arizona and director of the school’s Institute for LGBT Studies, says she

TRANSGENDER TERMINOLOGY

Covering the transgender community involves a specific vocabulary, from pronoun usage to medical descriptions. A glossary:

Cisgender *Used by some to describe people who are not transgender. “Cis-” is a Latin prefix meaning “on the same side as,” and is therefore an antonym of “trans-.”*

Gender dysphoria *The American Psychiatric Association’s description of the condition in which the sex someone is assigned at birth does not match their gender identity. Some transgender advocates believe a medical diagnosis is necessary for health insurance that covers treatments recommended for transgender people.*

Gender expression *External manifestations of gender, expressed through names, pronouns, clothing, haircut, behavior, voice, or body characteristics. Typically, transgender people seek to make their gender expression align with their gender identity, rather than the sex they were assigned at birth.*

Gender identity *The internal, deeply held sense of one’s gender. For transgender people, their own internal gender identity does not match the sex they were assigned at birth.*

Gender non-conforming *Used to describe those whose gender expression is different from conventional expectations of masculinity and femininity.*

Genderqueer *Used by some who experience their gender identity and/or gender expression as falling outside the categories of male and female.*

Pronouns *The Associated Press style guide says to refer to an individual by their preferred gendered pronoun, or, if it’s not possible to ask for a preference, the pronoun that is most*

consistent with an individual’s gender expression. Many major publications follow this rule but the usage of gender-neutral pronouns—the singular “they” or new terms such as “ze” or “xe”—varies and is changing rapidly. The Washington Post recently announced that it would allow the singular “they,” while The New York Times recently allowed the honorific “Mx.,” although standards editor Philip Corbett wrote that the paper doesn’t have a set rule on gender-neutral terms and has avoided using “nontraditional” pronouns. BuzzFeed, on the other hand, says it will use any preferred pronoun, possibly accompanied by a short explainer if the term is less familiar.

Sex reassignment surgery (SRS) *Refers to doctor-supervised surgical interventions, which not all transgender people choose, or can afford, to undergo. Also known as gender reassignment surgery or gender affirming surgery.*

Transgender *An umbrella term, often abbreviated as “trans,” for people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from what is typically associated with the sex they were assigned at birth. A transgender man is someone whose assigned sex at birth was female but identifies and lives as a man. A transgender woman is someone whose assigned sex at birth was male but identifies and lives as a female.*

Transition *Altering one’s birth sex is a complex process that occurs over a long period of time and may include medical and legal steps, using a different name and new pronouns, dressing differently, hormone therapy, and surgery.*

SOURCES: AP, BUZZFEED, GLAAD’S “MEDIA GUIDE ON TRANSGENDER TERMINOLOGY,” THE NEW YORK TIMES, THE WASHINGTON POST

was on the phone with producers three times a week for about a month.

That effort was evident when the special aired. Host Diane Sawyer didn't just use Jenner's chosen pronoun, she also noted that she was doing so and explained why. Allowing transgender people to decide which pronouns should be used in referring to them is an important issue for the transgender community. This was especially important as, at the time, Jenner's pronoun preference was male, which could potentially lead people to think it's acceptable to refer to all transgender women with male pronouns. And Sawyer didn't just ask which surgical steps Jenner might take in her transition, she also noted that it was Jenner's choice to discuss this, and that, generally, asking a transgender person about their genitals is inappropriate.

The special was largely well received—and watched by about 17 million people that night, more than twice as many people as usually watch the network in that time slot. Many transgender advocates, worried that a profile of a reality show star on mainstream television would be sensationalist and exploitative, applauded the program.



A COUPLE MONTHS LATER, VANITY Fair ran a cover story about Jenner. While the release of the cover broke Vanity Fair's single-day online traffic record with 9 million unique visitors, Buzz Bissinger's accompanying profile was criticized for his use of male pronouns when referring to her pre-transition, which GLAAD's media guide says should be avoided. Transgender advocacy groups recommend referring to a transgender person by their post-transition name and pronoun, even when describing the person pre-transition. Stryker compares it to writing about Malcolm X; though he was born Malcolm Little, journalists rarely call him that when writing about him as a child.

As a contrast to Jenner's story, Washington Post feature writer Monica Hesse profiled Sara Simone, a transgender woman in her 50s a few years into her transition who was, until very recently, unemployed and homeless.

According to the National Transgender Discrimination survey, carried out in 2011 by the National Center for Transgender Equality and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (now known as the National LGBTQ Task Force), 15 percent of transgender people and gender-nonconforming people surveyed said they earned less than \$10,000 annually, compared with just 4 percent of the general population. Transgender people are also twice as likely as the general population to be unemployed, and one in five said they had experienced homelessness at some point in their lives because of their gender identity.

Simone was willing to share details about her financial troubles for the profile. She was not willing to share her birth name, however.



While Hesse and her editor, Post senior editor at large Ann Gerhart, needed to know Simone's birth name for fact-checking purposes—verifying that she served in the armed forces, for instance—they saw no need to include it in the story. “One of the ways we looked at it was, this is her legal name now,” Hesse says. “When we write about women who have taken on their husband's names and those are their legal names, do we then make sure to include their maiden names? No, we don't do that.”

Similarly, they didn't see a need to dwell on Simone's life before her transition. This was a story about Simone's life now. At the same time, Gerhart says, Simone had lived as a man for five decades: “Journalistically, I had questions about how she dealt with that. What are the ways you can reconcile the person who you had been and who you are relieved you aren't anymore, and integrate that into your experience now?” A chance encounter at Simone's workplace gave the story insight into those questions.

Alex Bergeron
struggles to reconcile being transgender and Muslim, an issue explored in a Los Angeles Times story



A focus on telling individual “coming out” stories is a missed opportunity to provide a broader picture of the transgender community

Simone worked at a nonprofit that helped homeless veterans. While meeting with one of those veterans, she noticed that he’d been stationed in the same place as Simone around the same time. Simone faced a decision. She could tell him about her own service, possibly helping her bond with the client. But that would mean revealing that she served under another name, opening her up to harassment for being transgender. Fear of harassment and violence from people who discover Simone is transgender is a recurring theme in the story. In the end, Simone didn’t reveal her military service to the veteran.

Simone’s fears are well grounded. Transgender women, especially women of color, are often targets of violence. A 2015 report from the HRC and the Trans People of Color Coalition, which advocates for transgender people of color, estimates that transgender women are 4.3 times more likely than cisgender women to be the victim of a homicide, and half of all transgender people will be sexually assaulted in their lifetimes. As of this

past November, at least 21 transgender people—a majority of whom were transgender women of color—had been murdered in 2015.

“It’s a real clear crisis that’s happening, but it’s not a new crisis,” says the Transgender Law Center’s Kris Hayashi. While some outlets have covered this issue, he says, it hasn’t gotten anywhere near the attention that Jenner has. Stryker, the University of Arizona professor, says it’s important for the media to remember that the transgender community is diverse, and not everyone in it will have the same experience. The progress that has been made may be beneficial to some, mostly white people of means, but not necessarily all, especially transgender women of color or people living in poverty.

Simone’s comments on social media are also quoted throughout the Post story, something Hesse and Gerhart say was crucial since it allowed them to let Simone talk about herself and her experience unprompted. In a video post in which she describes an abusive past relationship, Simone says, “This man tried to destroy me, but he

didn't destroy me." "I am very, very lovable," she writes in another update. "I am not a loser. I am lovable."

Simone friended Hesse on Facebook, which gave Hesse unexpected insight into her own reporting process. In the beginning, Simone would often say things on Facebook that she apparently didn't yet feel comfortable saying to Hesse. "Every time I would go home, she would post on Facebook an analysis of how she thought I had done that day," Hesse recalls. "What questions I had asked that she thought were stupid, or what she was afraid I wasn't getting. It was really interesting to see your reporting reviewed in real time that way."

It also gave Hesse a measure of how much her subject grew to trust her over the week they spent together. As time went on, the things Simone said on Facebook began to match what she told Hesse. To help foster a trusting relationship with Simone, Hesse had sent her a few articles she had written, including a profile of an agender (someone who doesn't identify as male or female) teenager. She didn't take any notes on the first day. By the end of the week Hesse spent following Simone to work, to her home, and even going out with friends, Simone trusted Hesse enough that she let Hesse meet her brother, someone she'd initially been reluctant to include in the story. Hesse thought the brother was necessary to the story because she felt she needed another scene of Simone interacting with someone who knew her well, and who was the closest family member Simone had at the time.

Unlike Hesse, Los Angeles Times reporter Garrett Therolf wasn't looking to write a story about a transgender person when he covered the Los Angeles Pride

parade in June 2015. But then he met Alex Bergeron, who was there as one of three winners of the Colin Higgins Youth Courage Award, given out by the Colin Higgins Foundation to LGBTQ people under 21 who advocate for their community. Therolf and Bergeron got to talking, and Bergeron mentioned struggling to reconcile being transgender with being Muslim, a subject Therolf had not seen covered before. Therolf had never written about transgender issues, but he had spent time reporting in Iraq and Egypt and was familiar with that region's conservative views toward LGBT people.

Therolf found an expert on transgender issues and Islam in Emory University professor Scott Siraj al-Haq Kugle, who has written multiple books about the subject of LGBT issues and Islam. "He helped me to realize how lonely it can be for folks trying to find their way and just how very nascent this movement [of LGBT Muslims] still is," Therolf says. "And he helped me understand the theological underpinnings for the work that is just beginning."

Therolf wrote in his story that in America "mosques tend to be conservative, and visits to the local imam or mosque committee chairman usually draw stern rebukes for LGBTQ Muslims."

Therolf was unsure whether he made the right call when it came to the pronouns he used for Bergeron. Bergeron's preferred pronoun is "they," because, as Therolf's article explains, Bergeron sees gender identity as a spectrum, rather than a binary. People who prefer gender-neutral singular pronouns, then, must either use invented terms like "ze" or the plural pronoun "they" as a singular. Both options are potentially confusing to reporters and readers who aren't used to seeing them.



Johanna Vasquez, pictured here in a video, is a transgender woman who fled her native El Salvador after a brutal sexual assault. She met with Fusion reporters several times before she went on the record with her story

COURTESY FUSION

Therolf got permission from the copy desk to use “they” and wrote a draft of the story, but ultimately he found it was too confusing to use a plural pronoun for an individual. “It is technically ungrammatical and it can be quite cumbersome and distracting for readers in a news story,” Therolf says. “I don’t know if we made the right call by reverting back to ‘he,’ but I will point out that Alex himself uses ‘he’ pronouns most of his day and so do the people around him.” The Transgender Law Center, in its “Trans Youth” guide to reporting on transgender and gender non-conforming young people, notes that many in that community use “they” as a pronoun.

Henry Fuhrmann, an assistant managing editor who oversees the Los Angeles Times copy desk, says Therolf’s decision to use “he” instead of “they” this time should not indicate that’s what the paper will do if the issue comes up again. “We’ll consider then what we think will work best for the story and its intended audience,” Fuhrmann says. “We’ll need to balance sensitivity to a subject against the risk of confusing readers.” Therolf says he thinks that as the concept of using “they” as a singular gender-neutral pronoun becomes more prevalent, it’ll be less confusing to readers.

In just the few months since Therolf’s story was published, both The New York Times and The Washington Post have used new gender-neutral terms. At the beginning of December, Post copy editor Bill Walsh sent out a memo stating that “they” could be used as a pronoun for people who did not identify as male or female. In late November, The New York Times used “Mx.” as an honorific—to much notice.

IN THE SPRING OF 2015, THE NEW York Times ramped up its coverage of the transgender community, launching a series of editorials, “Transgender Today,” focusing on relevant policy issues. “A lot of people were paying attention to transgender people in a way that we hadn’t really seen in the past,” says editorial board member Ernesto Londoño. “We thought that we would do a public service by outlining some of the policy issues, some of the unresolved issues that are hugely important for this community—that, for a lot of people, are a matter of life and death.”

More than 20 people—from developers to designers to photographers to editorial writers—helped get the series off the ground. Londoño had written about a transgender person before, but some members of the team had not. “It was an education for a lot of us,” Londoño says. Much of that education took place in the early stages of the project, when the team spent a lot of time discussing what was sensitive and what wasn’t, not just in the writing, but also in photography and design choices. This, says Transgender Law Center’s Marcellus, is an important but often overlooked component in coverage. A reporter can be extremely knowledgeable about the correct terminology, but an article can be completely

undermined if it’s accompanied by an insensitive photo caption or headline.

For the series, Londoño says advocacy groups were helpful in identifying issues the transgender community faced and providing necessary historical context and case law. There’s also a significant contribution from transgender people, in their own words and images. “We thought it would be very important to find a way to let transgender people tell their own stories and be their own advocates,” Londoño says.

To do this, the paper created a “storywall” for the series, allowing readers to submit their own experiences in text, photo, or video form, or a combination of all three. Brynn Tannehill’s video starts with the former Navy pilot describing when she realized she wanted to fly planes, and how she ultimately had to make a choice between her military career and coming out as transgender. Jesse writes about how he came out as transgender and began his transition while working as an educator in Louisiana—and how his students and co-workers have been largely supportive. Scott writes about being fired from his job at a software company in the San Francisco Bay Area after co-workers found out he was a transgender man. Katherine Bradford writes about being transgender and a parent, and sometimes explaining this to her children’s new friends or their parents.

Londoño wasn’t sure how eager transgender people would be to share their stories so publicly. He says the paper hoped for 50 stories by the end of the year. It got 40 by the end of the first day.

“One of the things that struck me when we started getting submissions was a lot of them were from veterans and people who talked about how hard it had been to wrestle with their gender identity and their career in the military,” Londoño says. “A lot of those people were discharged or saw no option but to leave the service. Those voices, I think, were very valuable for me and for us as we set out to make the case for a new policy in the military that allowed open transgender service.”

That editorial was published in June, and Londoño, who worked on the article with the LGBT organization Service Members, Partners, Allies for Respect and Tolerance for All, which specializes in military issues, says it’s the one of which he’s most proud. In July, the U.S. Department of Defense announced that it was working on new policies that would allow transgender people to serve openly in the military.

Reporting on the transgender community has come a long way in a very short time, but transgender individuals and advocates say there is still much work to be done. Among other things, BuzzFeed’s Talusan would like to see more stories about transgender people that aren’t just about their gender identity, stories where being transgender is not a subject’s defining characteristic.

“I would just like to see stories about what trans people are doing with their lives and in many ways not focusing on their transgender-ness unless it’s relevant somehow,” says the University of Arizona’s Stryker. “I think we’re just getting to that point.” ■

Stories transgender people posted on The New York Times site about the difficulties of serving in the military influenced an editorial on the subject

“THE SCREAMS OF THE WORLD”

**Are graphic
images of
violence too
distressing
to show—or
too important
to ignore?**

BY HELEN LEWIS

THERE WAS NO BLOOD, NO VIOLENCE, NO panic. Just a little boy's body washed ashore, one of thousands of victims of the refugee crisis unfolding along the borders of Europe. Yet the images of Alan Kurdi lying on a beach at Bodrum, Turkey, published in September, provoked fierce debate in newsrooms and on social media about whether the sight of a dead toddler was too distressing to show—or too important to ignore.

Several frames were available. Some showed Kurdi's body face down on the beach; others showed a policeman cradling the boy in his arms. In France, *Libération* was criticized for not printing the photographs at all. In Germany, *Bild* received so many complaints for publishing a photo on its back page that it removed all images from its September 8 issue to make a point. "We must force ourselves to look," wrote Julian Reichelt, editor in chief of *bild.de*. "Without pictures the world would be more ignorant, the needy even more invisible, more lost. ... Photographs are the screams of the world."

Liz Sly, Beirut bureau chief for *The Washington Post*, tweeted one of the photos—and was surprised by criticisms that she was violating Kurdi's dignity. "That puzzled me because I spend every day looking at these images of death," she says, "and anyone in the region does, anyone who covers Syria—at least half a dozen pictures of dead children every day. Perhaps we're violating

their dignity by not publicizing them and having them die in silence in the dark."

With the ongoing conflict in Syria and Iraq, frequent mass shootings in the U.S., and terrorist incidents such as the massacre in Paris, newsrooms are faced with constant decisions over the use of graphic or distressing images. What rules, if any, should news organizations follow when deciding whether to publish such images? Has the easy availability of graphic content on social media numbed audiences to tragedy? What effect does the production and consumption of such images have on journalists, editors, and their audiences? And does publishing emotive pictures like that of Alan Kurdi risk tipping stories from reportage into advocacy?

Yet the discussion is also familiar. Many of the most iconic news images of the last 100 years—a 9-year-old girl fleeing a napalm attack in Vietnam; the burned Iraqi soldier who died climbing from a car in the first Gulf War; Richard Drew's "Falling Man" who jumped from a World Trade Center tower on 9/11; the dead passengers of the downed Malaysian Airlines plane in Ukraine—have been accompanied by debates about the ethics of their publication. Part of their power stems precisely from the fact that they show moments of pain and death usually hidden from view. It's difficult to look at these images, and difficult to look away.

Photographers, of course, are on the front line of determinations about when, how, or whether to take these kinds of pictures. Gary Knight, co-founder of the VII Photo Agency, makes a distinction between taking distressing photographs and distributing them. Capturing an image and publishing it are separate decisions, he argues: "If you're performing that role as a photographer or journalist, as some sort of witness or commentator, I think you need to record those things. But I don't think that they need to be published." Once the photograph is taken, Knight believes, a consultation needs to begin between the photographer and the editors. For Knight, the way an image is framed and publicized is just as important as the content of the image itself.

Perhaps the most persistent questions about how images of violence and death are framed are whether they dehumanize their subjects and whether they prioritize the suffering of certain groups over that of others. Michael Shaw, a California-based clinical psychologist and founder of the *Reading The Pictures* blog, calls this the dilemma of "the Western gaze"—a process by which deaths and disasters are unconsciously split into those that matter more and those that matter less.

In the wake of the November 13 terror attacks on Paris, social media users questioned why a bombing in Beirut on November 12 (which killed 43 people) did not receive the



Images published in September of the body of a young refugee stirred debate among journalists and readers. Was it a violation of the boy's dignity or would it have been worse for his death to go unnoticed?

same level of media attention. “When my people died, no country bothered to light up its landmarks in the colors of their flag,” Elie Fares, a Lebanese doctor, wrote on his blog stateofmind13.com. “Their death was but an irrelevant fleck along the international news cycle, something that happens in those parts of the world.”

Alexey Furman, a Ukrainian photojournalist now studying for a master’s degree at the University of Missouri’s School of Journalism, felt a similar dynamic while covering the Euromaidan uprising and subsequent Russian annexation of the Crimea in 2014. He felt uneasy seeing American colleagues taking photographs of dead Ukrainian fighters. “As a photographer, I didn’t like or dislike [the photographs]. But as a citizen, there was a storm happening inside me ... It was painful to see my people dead and just corpses there in the middle of a field, [photos] being taken by anyone.”

Rhonda Shearer, who runs iMediaEthics, a nonprofit site that investigates media ethics, says her organization’s investigation into images of the 2007 assassination of Pakistan leader Benazir Bhutto suggests Western media do treat dead Westerners differently. Many U.S. news outlets, including The New York Times, printed photographs from the Bhutto killing showing piles of dismembered corpses alongside a man wearing a brown jacket who was crying and gesturing.

Although “Brown Jacket Man” was on the scene for more than an hour, iMediaEthics found that none of the Western journalists present discovered his name or if he was, as the captions later suggested, a “Bhutto supporter.” “If you transpose that onto an American scene,” Shearer says, “that would just never happen.”

In response to the iMediaEthics report, a photographer contacted Shearer to contest that assertion, pointing to the photographs of 9/11. But Shearer contends that very few images of dead Americans were published after that tragedy, the most graphic image in the mainstream media being Todd Maisel’s New York Daily News photograph of a severed hand. Images of people jumping from the twin towers were also rarely published in the U.S., and “people jumping,” Shearer says, “that’s clean shots compared with what I’m sure photographers have, which are the smashed bodies at the bottom of the World Trade Center, which is more what we saw in the Bhutto killing.”

Some argue that the cumulative effect of these editorial decisions is to perpetuate Western exceptionalism. Cultural critic David Shields, who analyzed about 1,000 front-page images of war from The New York Times for his book “War Is Beautiful,” says that “photo editors are looking for photos that reify received notions about war and battle and heroism and masculinity. It’s hard

to resist the interpretation that this is the distribution of ideology by other means.” He points to recurring tropes—children juxtaposed with friendly, father-like soldiers, or iterations of the Pietà from Christian art. “There is an ancient tradition of brutal and more truth-telling war photography,” Shields says. “If you only read The New York Times, you’d think war is heaven or, at worst, war is heck.”

In 2010, Time published an arresting cover image: Aisha, an Afghan teenager who had her nose and ears cut off by the Taliban. Kira Pollack, Time’s director of photography, explains that one of the considerations staffers took into account when debating whether to use the image was the effect on Aisha of becoming “iconic,” particularly since she still lived in Afghanistan at the time. “There are all these other things that go into these discussions,” Pollack says. “What happens when children see these pictures? That’s a conversation that we have at Time as well, because our audience is our families.”

The magazine published Aisha’s picture on the cover, with a provocative headline: “What Happens If We Leave Afghanistan.” For some, that wording tipped the piece into advocacy. The picture and headline became an argument for continuing American military involvement in the region.

The Kurdi pictures also made a polemical point, even if an uncontroversial one:



Photos from the downed flight in Ukraine were among the most widely viewed images of 2015

a call to action in the face of Europe's refugee crisis. Many who defended publication of the images cited this moral imperative. Knight is unconvinced. "I've been making pictures like that all my life, and very rarely did any of them make a difference," he says. When the European Journalism Observatory looked at pre- and post-Kurdi coverage of immigration in three newspapers in each of eight European countries, it saw that "positive humanitarian stories about migrants" rose after the photos ran, but within about a week had decreased to pre-Kurdi levels. However, a study by the Visual Social Media Lab, backed by Google, found that social media users did change their language after the picture was published—the majority switched from using "migrant" to "refugee," and this effect persisted for at least two months.

The Post's Sly sees the reaction to the Kurdi picture as an argument for the publication of more distressing images, not fewer. She's disappointed that the "Caesar" images—which were smuggled out of Syria by a military policeman code-named Caesar, and which allegedly show torture victims of the Assad regime—were not published widely. "I'm not sure it helps you to understand how intrusive this war is if you're not seeing how violent it is and you're not sharing that sense of horror and outrage that the people in the region are," Sly says.

Many journalists working in the Middle East, where images of death and violence are more common on TV and in other media, echo the point. "In places like Latin America and the Middle East, people are more open to seeing images of suffering," says photographer Andrea Bruce, who has worked in Iraq and Afghanistan. "It's not labeled as an intrusion but more often proof of a wrongdoing by a government or military."

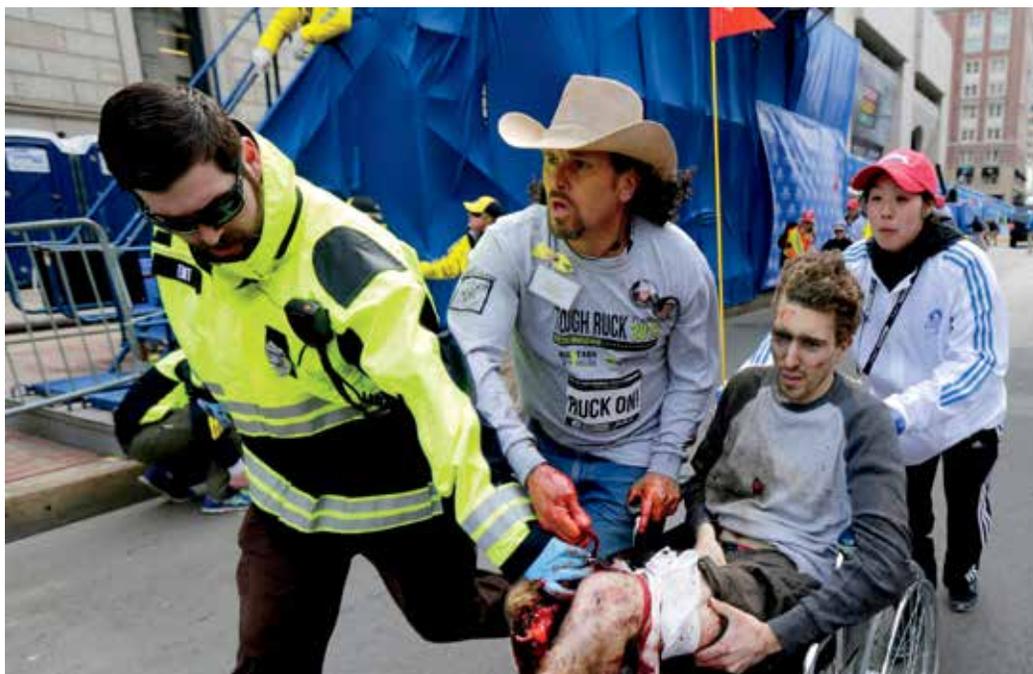
WHILE SOME EXPERIENCE being photographed as a violation, others see it as a validation—a crucial recognition of a wrong. In Ukraine, Furman recalls arriving in the village of Mykolaivka during fighting with pro-Russian separatists. An angry crowd that believed the Ukrainian government was responsible for shelling the village confronted him. A man grabbed him and took him to a bombed apartment building where a body lay in the rubble. "The community wanted me to get this picture out," Furman says. "They wanted the world to know that this is what happened in their small town that no one ever talked about in international coverage."

Jeff Bauman, who lost his legs in the Boston Marathon bombings in 2013, made a similar point in *The Guardian* last year.

Charles Krupa, the Associated Press photographer who took pictures of Bauman and his injuries as he was being rushed from the scene in a wheelchair, apologized for doing so. "I told Charlie that I understand now, like I didn't then, that he was helping us that day, in the best way he knew how," Bauman wrote. "He was showing the world the truth—that bombs tear flesh and smash bones—and making the tragedy real."

The publication of graphic images from Syria has become particularly vexed as so few journalists are working in the region. Most of the images from the country are taken by activists and can be hard to verify and interpret. Others are straightforward propaganda from jihadist groups. ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) fighters film many of their killings in high definition, adding logos and graphics and distributing them through their online magazine, *Dabiq*, Twitter, and other social media.

ISIS videos follow an approach also used by the Taliban, which once banned photography but now has its own video production unit, and Hezbollah in Lebanon, which runs its own TV station. Images of atrocities—and of civilians killed by Western military action—are key tools of propaganda and recruitment, according to Susie Linfield, a professor at New York University's Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute and author of *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and*



Jeff Bauman, in wheelchair, praises images of the Boston bombing for "showing the world the truth"

Political Violence.” The images can be especially effective because they are often broadcast to people who are illiterate, Linfield says, “who have no access to newspapers, so this is their main source of information, this constant flood of atrocity images.”

The ubiquity of graphic images has lent fresh impetus to worries that disturbing photographs undermine public support for military actions carried out in their name. Canadian photographer Paul Watson’s images of a dead American soldier being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu in 1993 catalyzed President Bill Clinton’s decision to pull U.S. peacekeeping troops out of the country the next year. Osama bin Laden later said the unwillingness of the U.S. to tolerate military casualties demonstrated “[its] impotence and weaknesses.”

Discussions of the effects of graphic images tend to focus on those upset or offended by them and less so on those who might like them too much. In the wake of repeated mass shootings in the U.S., some journalists have expressed concern that media coverage could be exacerbating the phenomenon. A week before the Kurdi pictures began to circulate, social media was also the place where many saw the fatal shooting of Virginia news reporter Alison Parker and camera operator Adam Ward by a disgruntled former colleague. The shooting happened during a live television broadcast and

was also filmed by the shooter himself, who was holding a camera just above his gun. Soon after the killings, he uploaded the footage to Twitter and Facebook. Both social networks had an auto-play feature, meaning that thousands of users ended up watching a snuff video without choosing to or having any warning about the content. Both social networks quickly deactivated the shooter’s accounts. The next day, stills from both Ward and the shooter’s videos appeared on front pages. In Britain, the tabloid *The Sun* used a frame that showed the moment he fired, the muzzle flash from the gun visible.

Linfield argues these images should not have been published. In October, *Mother Jones* published a cover story about efforts to stop the mass shootings. In a related article online, national affairs editor Mark Follman reflected on how news coverage of such incidents affected vulnerable young men, arguing that sensationalist reporting was both encouraging would-be killers to act and to make their crimes more spectacular. “Forensic psychologists have come to understand, by interviewing these people—the ones who survive—they know they are very aware of the media attention they will get,” Follman says. “It’s what they want. It’s a certain responsibility that the media has now that we know that, not to engage with that any more than we need to in order to report forensically for the public interest.”

Follman argues that media organizations need to make sure that photographs they publish of such killers and their crimes do not contribute to their self-mythologization. He contends that, in the case of the man who shot U.S. Representative Gabrielle Giffords and others in Tucson in 2011, it would be better to use a neutral yearbook photograph rather than the mug shot that was seized on by the press. “There’s an argument to be made not only that it’s not necessary, but it’s potentially damaging the people who emulate [him],” Follman says. “They see that this guy is memorialized with this deranged, smug grin on his face.” Similarly, he suggests journalists think carefully before using images of the gunman who killed nine people in a church in Charleston, South Carolina, waving a Confederate flag and wearing white nationalist symbols, taken from his social media profiles. Some argue we should go even further: following a shooting in Roseburg, Oregon that left 10 dead, including the gunman, Douglas County Sheriff John Hanlin refused to name the perpetrator when briefing the media. “I will not give him the credit he probably sought prior to this horrific and cowardly act,” he told reporters. Several media organizations have followed suit, with *The Washington Post* publishing on December 5 a long read about one of the Roseburg survivors without once mentioning the gunman’s name.

THE LACK OF CONTEXT ON SOCIAL MEDIA ADDS A NEW WRINKLE TO THE DEBATE ABOUT PUBLISHING GRAPHIC PHOTOGRAPHS



The image in 2010 of Aisha, who had her nose and ears cut off by the Taliban, coupled with the provocative headline elicited criticism that Time had tipped over into advocacy journalism

OPPOSITE: JEROME DELAY/ASSOCIATED PRESS

THE USE OF GRAPHIC IMAGES should prompt many questions in a responsible newsroom. Is the image's news value or public interest greater than the potential negative impact on the subject? Does it bolster an existing narrative about a conflict? If so, does it do so consciously and fairly? Does it dehumanize its subjects or draw the world's attention to their plight? Could the image be used as propaganda or drive a vulnerable person to commit a crime? If so, is it still essential to the story and therefore should it be published anyway?

There are no easy answers to these questions, and even highly ethical, conscientious journalists will disagree over particular cases. Bradley Secker, who has worked in Iraq, Syria, and Greece and been published in outlets including *The Independent*, *The New Republic*, and *The National* in the United Arab Emirates, believes news organizations can address these concerns in part by giving audiences as much context as possible alongside the photographs. "As long as the image captions are accurate and the image itself hasn't been manipulated, there is little room for propaganda," Secker says.

Reading *The Pictures*'s Shaw cites the Pulitzer-winning work of Craig F. Walker, who spent a year photographing an Iraq War veteran for *The Denver Post* and accompanied the images with extended

captions. This is a way not just to mitigate the reductive nature of photos, Shaw argues, but to create a richer, more nuanced form of storytelling. In contrast, he criticizes website photo galleries because they strip away context.

Social media complicates the equation even further. Should a graphic image be appended to a tweet, when there is so little opportunity to provide context? Should social media companies disable auto-play for videos to avoid inadvertently displaying snuff videos in people's timelines?

For *Time*'s Pollack, discussions about graphic or distressing images matter because those images often resonate most with audiences. Jerome Sessini's haunting pictures of the dead passengers of MH17, a plane shot down over Ukraine, were the most viewed on *Time*'s Lightbox section last year, attracting nearly 12 million pageviews and 900,000 unique visitors.

The appeal of Sessini's photographs highlights an uncomfortable truth: For all the outcry, there is clearly an audience for these kinds of images. As a photographer, Gary Knight argues that audiences need to ask themselves their motivations for viewing such images, just as the media must interrogate its reasons for publishing them.

Knight tells the story of returning to London from an assignment in Bosnia in 1997 and being asked by *Newsweek* to cover

the aftermath of Princess Diana's death, which was initially blamed on paparazzi pursuing her car through Paris. Outside Buckingham Palace, "I got a lot of grief from the public for being a photographer," he recalls. "I was blamed, collectively, for killing Princess Diana. And I thought, these are the women who are buying the *Sun* and the *Mirror* and the *Mail*, and all these newspapers that were hounding Princess Diana."

Barbie Zelizer, professor of communication at the University of Pennsylvania and author of *About to Die: How News Images Move the Public*, suggests that, despite new technologies that make graphic images easier to capture and share, the controversy hasn't changed much over the years. "The images we are getting, and the debates which greet them, are very much the same as they've always been," she says. She offers a simple, though far from infallible, test in deciding whether to publish. Is the photo central to the story? If the story cannot be told without it, the image must be published, no matter how distressing it might be, she argues.

Alexey Furman believes that graphic images only work if they make the reader want to know more about them, rather than instantly turn the page. "We have to produce images that the world will be ready to spend some time with, and read the captions, and look again, and observe." ■



Coverage of the Paris attacks reignited debate over whether journalists treat deaths in the West differently

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50 YEARS OF

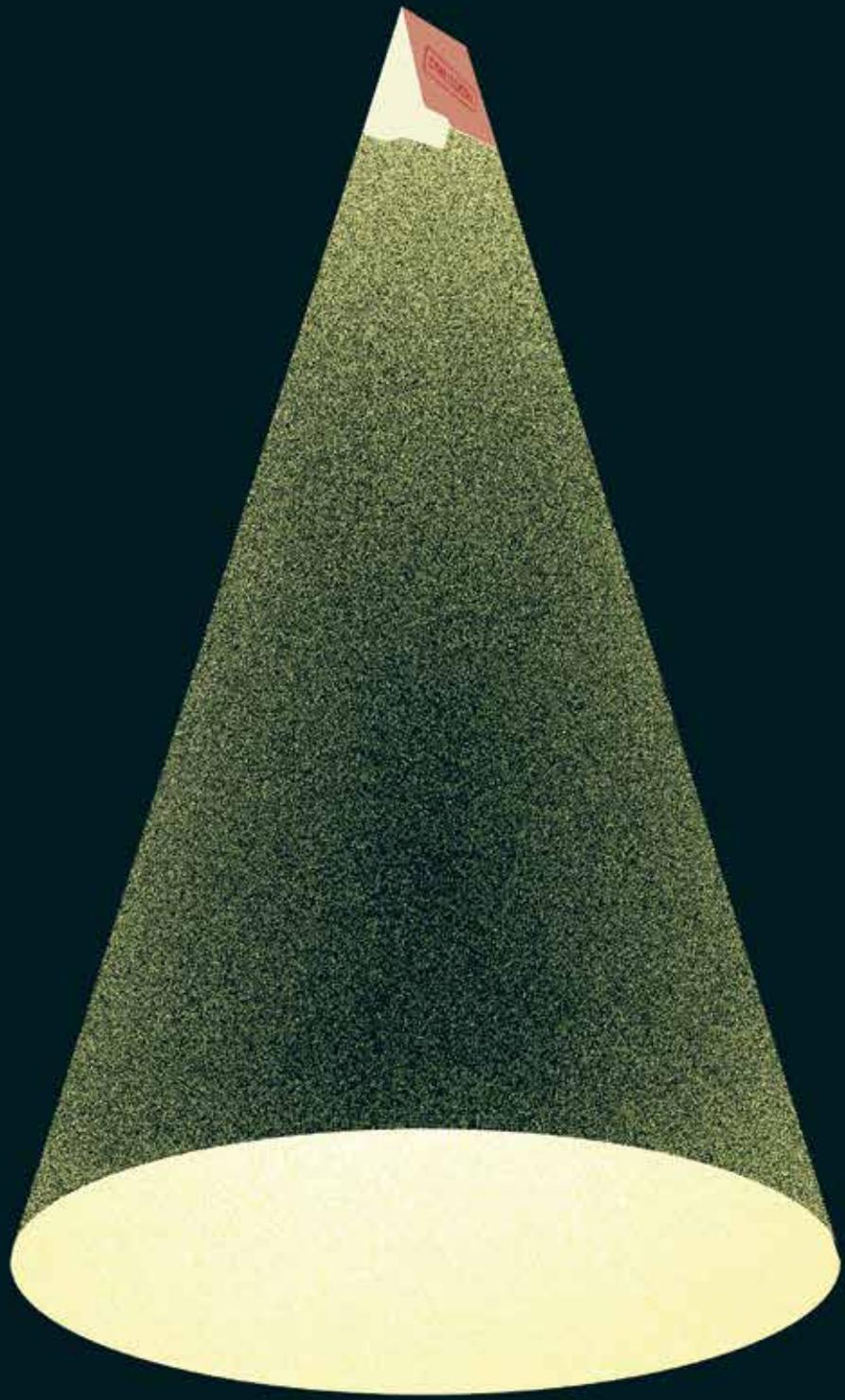
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**As the Freedom of Information Act
turns 50, journalists are innovating new
ways to use the law**

I

BY JOHN DYER

A



DAVE PHILIPPS WAS well acquainted with the plight of troubled veterans when he heard about a soldier in the El Paso County jail two years ago.

As a reporter at The (Colorado Springs) Gazette, Philipps had written extensively about veterans coping with life after combat. The soldier in the county jail was a special case, though. He was psychotic.

After tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, the soldier, Jerry Melton, was prone to violent outbursts and had pointed a loaded machine gun at fellow soldiers during an argument. After numerous misdiagnoses, drug treatments, and a stint in a secure psychiatric hospital where he showed signs of homicidal urges, the Army remanded him to the civilian jail to await court-martial for the gun incident.

At first, Philipps believed he'd simply found a new angle on the old story of soldiers suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and traumatic brain injuries. "What counts as an injury?" Philipps says. "What counts as psychological? And how can you tell? I went into it thinking that was the story."

But Philipps changed his mind after he returned to the jail to see Melton a second time. The soldier was gone. He'd voluntarily quit the military without facing charges. "It took a while to figure out that the Army had come to him and said, 'We won't court-martial you if you sign a paper,'" recalls Philipps, adding that Melton's get-out-of-jail card came at a price. "Part of the deal is signing away your claims to veterans' benefits."

The episode got Philipps thinking. How many vets had quit the Army and lost their benefits in lieu of facing court-martial for fighting, alcohol abuse, insubordination, and other behaviors associated with PTSD and similar injuries? "We had a lot of people getting arrested for violent crimes in Colorado fresh back from Iraq," he says.

A Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request answered Philipps' question.

Philipps submitted a FOIA to the Army requesting data on GIs given so-called Chapter 10 discharges for misconduct. Around six weeks later, he received a bunch of spreadsheets via e-mail. "As soon as I saw the data, it was very clear there was a sharp increase [in Chapter 10 discharges], an increase that was sharpest where there were the most combat troops," he says. "Did it definitely say that troops that were burned out were getting kicked out the back door?"



MICHAEL CIAGLO/THE (COLORADO SPRINGS) GAZETTE

No. All I had was correlation. That gave both me and the newspaper confidence to do something bigger.”

The result was the 2014 Pulitzer Prize-winning “Other than Honorable” series about the Army discharging traumatized and injured soldiers for misconduct. “This week, a Gazette investigation has shown that the number of soldiers discharged Army-wide for misconduct has increased every year since 2006 and is up more than 60 percent in that time, according to records obtained through the Freedom of Information Act,” Philipps wrote.

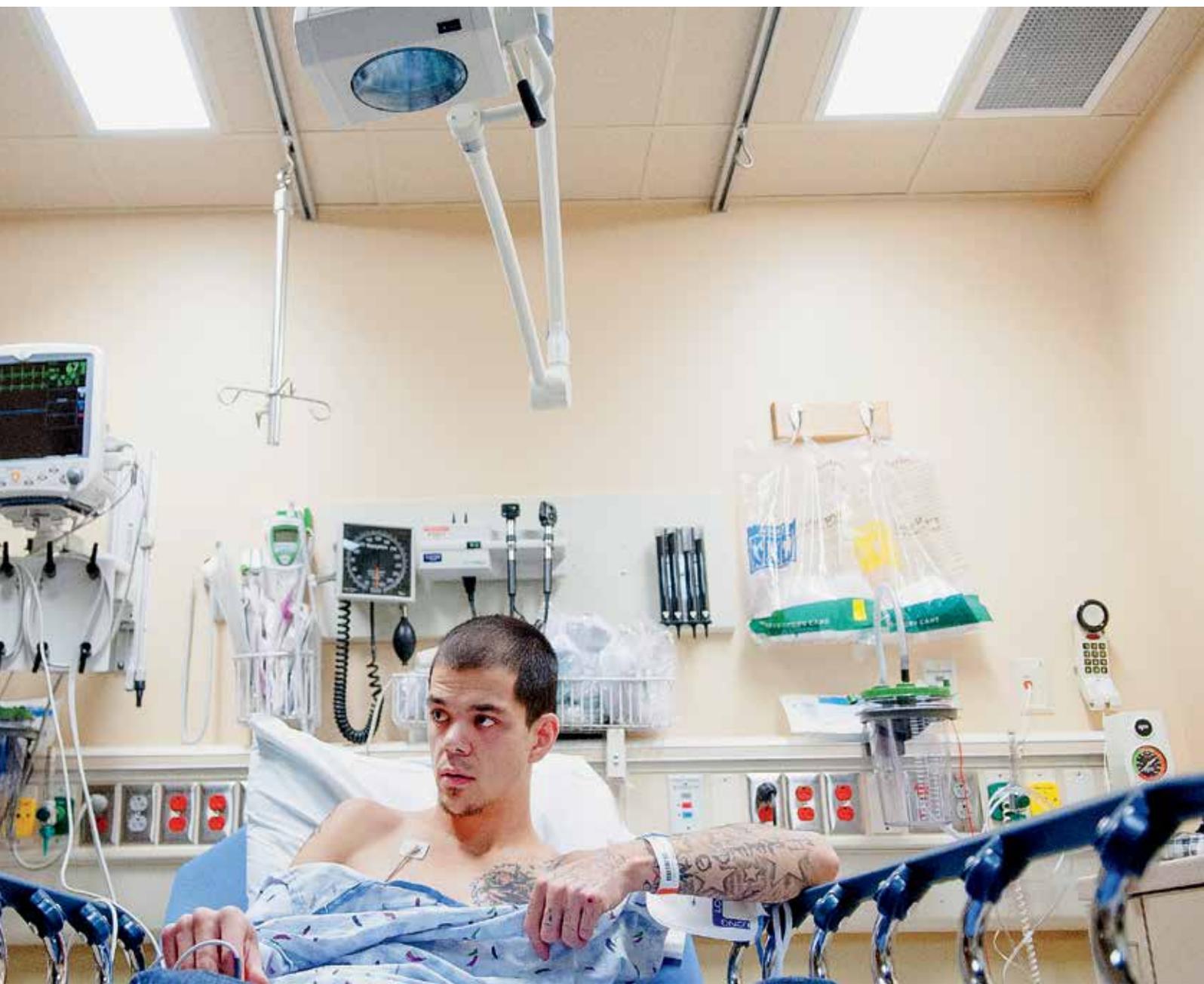
“Other than Honorable”—the military’s designation for Chapter 10 discharges—featured stellar gumshoe reporting. Philipps interviewed discharged veterans coping with psychological distress, addiction, and anger management. He found one Special Forces soldier who languished in solitary confinement for nine months while the Army debated whether to treat his PTSD and brain injuries sustained in a roadside bomb blast in Iraq or prosecute him for beating his wife and attacking prison guards.

But the linchpin of the series was the FOIA data. It showed Philipps that there

were other soldiers like Melton. “All told, more than 76,000 soldiers have been kicked out of the Army since 2006,” Philipps wrote. “They end up in cities large and small across the country, in hospitals and homeless shelters, abandoned trailers and ratty apartments, working in gas fields and at the McDonald’s counter.”

After the series came out, Army rules were changed to ensure that mental health professionals sit on discharge boards. They now have a voice in determining whether a soldier should be given a medical discharge rather than an “other than honorable”

Soldiers, such as Kash Alvaro, gave up VA health benefits in return for getting discharged from the Army, a story that a FOIA request helped uncover



designation that forecloses their access to the VA system. The Government Accountability Office is now investigating past misconduct discharges, too.

The Freedom of Information Act turns 50 this year. The law gives anyone the right to file a written request to obtain records from the federal government without explanation, as long as those records don't fall under nine exceptions, like jeopardizing national security, that prohibit their release. It remains one of the most powerful and fundamental tools of American journalism.

Phillips now works at The New York Times. But when he was at The (Colorado Springs) Gazette writing "Other than Honorable," he worked for a 70,000-circulation daily still recovering from its parent company's bankruptcy a few years before. FOIA empowered him to call to account the biggest arm of the U.S. government. "FOIA, to me, is a fundamental, bedrock way that people who believe in democracy think about transparency and its role in government," says John Wonderlich, policy director of the Sunlight Foundation. "You can be a felon in jail in India and submit a federal information request to the U.S. government. It's not a right that's restricted by who people are. That's pretty extraordinary. It's clearly played a fundamental role in giving people access to basic information about what their government is doing."

FOIA and its analogous state records laws have made possible stories revealing the inner workings of government through politicians' correspondence, policy memos, internal reports and other texts compiled without the input of press secretaries and other handlers. The laws are at the center of the 2016 presidential race, too. Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton is under fire for rerouting her e-mails while Secretary of State through a private server, a move that many allege was designed to bypass FOIA. New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, a Republican presidential candidate, is still battling the media over requests for state documents related to allegations that his aides created gridlock on the George Washington Bridge in 2013.

But even as FOIA remains vital and relevant, cultural shifts in the past 50 years have exposed its shortcomings, sometimes in ironic ways.

Court decisions have interpreted the law in ways that tend to expand or protect privacy rights. Those interpretations have occurred as the government itself has elec-

tronically surveilled citizens without their knowledge or permission and individuals willingly share intimate details of their lives on Facebook and other social media. As the government struggles to keep up with archiving technology and the explosive growth in digital information, media start-ups and private groups are developing innovative FOIA requesting and cataloging technologies to make the process faster and more efficient. Human nature, however, remains the biggest wild card in FOIA requests. Bureaucrats need only cite an exemption to reject a FOIA application, which can lead to costly and lengthy court cases.

The perceived arbitrariness inherent in FOIA requests has led many journalists to charge that FOIA is broken. "I often wonder if we are better off without a law at all," says University of Arizona journalism professor David Cuillier. "Public record statutes in a lot of ways give government officials the ability to legally delay releasing information, to deny information on often questionable reasoning. They will just pick an exemption—personnel, or it's under investigation, or prejudicial discussions. The law allows those pegs to hang those denials on." The Reporters Without Borders' World Press Freedom Index ranks the U.S. as 49th in the world, below El Salvador and Niger. Among the group's criteria, Cuillier notes, is the lack of a shield law for journalists, government seizures of reporters' phone records, and excessive controls by federal public information officers.

"YOU NEED TO KNOW THE PROCESSES, THE BUREAUCRATIC QUIRKS OF A PLACE, WHERE POWER FLOWS. IF YOU ARE NOT FAMILIAR WITH THAT, THEN YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT DOCUMENTS TO LOOK FOR"

—Shawn Boburg, *The (Bergen County, N.J.) Record*



A FOIA request about drone flights led to a scoop about the high frequency of crashes

It wasn't supposed to be this way. Congressman John Moss, a California Democrat, first proposed legislation that would become FOIA in the 1950s, amid the secretive climate of Washington during the Cold War. In 1955, Moss became chairman of the Special Subcommittee on Government Information. He used that perch to shame and cajole other politicians into supporting FOIA. The committee—as well as the American Society of Newspaper Editors, educators, scientists, and others—conducted a public campaign for the bill. In 1966, as Democrats faced a tough midterm election over Vietnam and deteriorating race relations, President Lyndon B. Johnson reluctantly signed FOIA into law rather than allow Republicans to paint his party as against open government.

Congress has since amended FOIA every 10 years or so. In 1974, after the Watergate scandal, lawmakers set up mechanisms like requiring agencies to respond to requests in a timely manner—the limit is now 20 days—disciplinary procedures for wrongly withholding information as judged by administrative appeals or court rulings, and waiving fees for journalists and public interest groups. Other major changes include extending FOIA to electronic records like e-mail in 1996 and creating the Office of Government Information Services to serve as FOIA ombudsman in 2007.

Court decisions have also modified the law. Under FOIA, if the government denies a request for records, requesters have few options. They can sometimes appeal, depending on the agency. They can request mediation through the Office of Government Information Services. Or they can file a lawsuit charging that the government is unfairly withholding information. According to the Associated Press, officials in fiscal year 2014 admitted they were wrong to withhold documents in around one in three instances when requesters appealed, the highest reversal rate in at least five years. Litigation remains by far the most frequent option for requesters who feel they've been treated unfairly.

"The vast majority of requesters who don't have the resources or the wherewithal to challenge agencies in court proceed at a real disadvantage," says David Sobel, senior counsel at the Electronic Frontier Foundation. "It's unfortunate that if you want the law to work in a reasonably effective way, you often need to have the ability to get a court to intervene."

Court cases come in response to officials rejecting FOIA requests, and those decisions reflect how administration attitudes haven't changed much since Moss's time.

On his first full day in office in 2009, President Barack Obama issued a memorandum on FOIA with the goal of leading the most transparent administration in history. "In the face of doubt, openness prevails," the memo read, ordering agencies to presume records were declassified unless there was a clear reason to exempt them from the law. Coming in the wake of President George W. Bush's administration and the tight security atmosphere following the September 11th terror attacks, many journalists were hopeful that Obama would change how the federal government released records. That didn't happen.

"The Obama administration even now continues to portray itself as responsible and transparent when it comes to government records requests," says AP investigative team news editor Ted Bridis, who published an extensive analysis of FOIA statistics in March. "It has become inarguable over the last seven years that they are doing a lousy job. They had said all the right things, but when it comes into practice, when the rubber meets the road, it's just a horrible situation."

Of the record 714,000 FOIA requests filed with the federal government in the 2014 fiscal year—that includes journalists, citizens, and companies—officials responded to around 650,000 requests, a 4 percent decrease compared to the year before, Bridis wrote, citing government statistics. The government rejected requests or redacted documents in almost 251,000 cases, or 39 percent of the time, citing exemptions in a record 555,000 instances. In around 216,000 requests, officials determined the inquiry was inappropriate, they couldn't find records, or requesters refused to pay copying fees and other costs.

Melanie Ann Pustay, director of the Justice Department's Office of Information Policy, defends the government's performance. "I'm always perplexed by those sorts of criticisms," she says, adding that agencies have outright rejected only 9 percent of FOIA requests since she became director of the office in 2007—a figure that does not include denials based on requesters refusing to pay fees, inquiries that are still pending, and a host of other rejections and delays. "Certainly, yes, there are backlogs of FOIA requests at many agencies.

Certainly the numbers of incoming requests have increased. But when you look at how agencies have responded to those realities, year after year agencies are able to improve the average number of days it takes to process requests, and they also have maintained a really high release rate."

But requesters also brought more FOIA lawsuits against the federal government in fiscal year 2014 than anytime since at least 2001, according to Syracuse University's Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC). The clearinghouse found that a total of 422 FOIA lawsuits were filed in federal district court compared to 387 in fiscal 2005, the next highest year in the period researchers examined. Media organizations were a small part of those cases, too, a sign that journalists aren't the only ones frustrated by the government's handling of FOIA. Newspapers and other media outlets filed 22 FOIA lawsuits in the last four years of President George W. Bush's administration and 18 in the first four years Obama has been in office.

JOURNALISTS AND OTHERS WHO frequently challenge the government's FOIA denials in court blame low-level bureaucrats, who are usually the first to receive FOIA applications. FOIA officers have little or no incentive to give the media or anyone else information that might anger their superiors, they argue. In his story about FOIA cases, for example, Bridis notes that the AP obtained e-mails from the National Archives and Records Administration about who pays for first lady Michelle Obama's dresses. Officials had redacted text in one sentence but on a subsequent page had failed to censor the same sentence: "We live in constant fear of upsetting the WH," a reference to the White House, suggesting the motivation for blacking out the sentence was related to anxiety about possible political blowback rather than protecting privacy under the law.

Susan Long, co-founder and co-director of TRAC, views government intransigency as more than just psychological, however. In 2013, TRAC requested reams of info from the Department of Homeland Security's customs, immigration, and border units. Even though the department on previous occasions had classified TRAC as an educational or media organization that need only pay duplicating costs, not search and processing fees, for this request the department opted

to consider TRAC a commercial entity. In defending the fees, the department argued that TRAC was seeking too much information, though officials didn't cite an exemption and reject their request. TRAC sued and a judge sided with the group in June. The department has since refused to process the request, calling it "burdensome."

John Tran, who litigates FOIA cases at the Electronic Privacy Information Center, sees an inverse relationship between how citizens and the government value information. The more people don't care about privacy, he says, the more the government values it. "Because they know so much about what can be gleaned from information, they don't want to give it out," he says. "They say, 'Everybody is oversharing these days. A lot of things are happening with that. We should take the opposite tack.' It makes total sense that they would be much more careful in this age of sharing and disclosing information."

Journalists and others have responded to the government's stance by doubling down on FOIA: carpet-bombing agencies with requests, learning deeply about bureaucracies to fine-tune inquiries, and inventing novel approaches to FOIA to circumvent bureaucratic obstacles.

VICE News reporter Jason Leopold is among a wave of journalists who have made careers out of FOIA. (Disclosure: I freelance for VICE News.) With around 2014 FOIA requests outstanding, he conducts much of his work solely through the law and its state counterparts, viewing himself as a crusader in the vein of I.F. Stone. "We're in a time right now when people want to see what I call primary source material," says Leopold. "Sometimes, a document will hold an entire story where you don't need anything else."

Using little more than documents obtained through public records requests, Leopold quoted a Department of Justice white paper that provided a legal justification for the CIA to kill an American abroad and uncovered how BP lobbied the U.S. government to keep its federal contracts after the 2010 Gulf of Mexico oil spill. He recently reported that, before a judge sent her to jail for five days for refusing to grant a marriage license to a homosexual couple, Rowan County Clerk Kim Davis in Kentucky sought to deny everyone—including same-sex couples—the right to marry. Davis's goal, Leopold reported, was "to not only refuse licenses to same-sex



Frequent FOIA request filer Jason Leopold: "Sometimes a document will hold an entire story"

couples, but to refuse them to 'all parties, as to not discriminate anyone.'" And he debunked claims floated by the Baltimore Police Department that gangs had formed an alliance to shoot police officers in that city this past year.

Part of Leopold's approach is filing FOIA requests as soon as the news happens. He requested state documents related to Davis, for example, as she grabbed headlines for her refusal to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples. Amid breaking news, the media often presents a version of events skewed by deadline pressures, lack of information, and the government's often tight control of the story, he says. FOIA helps him get into the heads of newsmakers as they make decisions. "I'm doing this aggressively as I have been doing because the sources that I deal with absolutely do not want to speak with me on the record or off the record about any issues I am talking about," says Leopold. "They fear they will be investigated, they will be prosecuted, and they will be jailed. I have to look at ways that I can continue to do my job."

Leopold also pays fees that other reporters would find outrageous, and he's not shy about filing lawsuits. In 2014, VICE News paid more than \$1,200, for example, for seven e-mails related to the civil unrest that erupted after a police officer shot and killed Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager, in Ferguson, Missouri. City officials said the money would pay for a consultant to search for the correspondence. Other news organizations complained to the state's attorney

**"WE NEED TO MAKE
ACCESS TO INFORMATION
A CONSTITUTIONAL
RIGHT IN THIS COUNTRY"**

—David Cuillier, University of Arizona
journalism professor

general about the fees, saying they violated Missouri's Sunshine Law. But Vice News went ahead and paid it. Leopold viewed it as calling their bluff. The story that emerged painted a picture of a venal city government—officials complained to each other about the media making it tough for the cops, while the outside firm hired to search archives never found an e-mail containing Brown's name in a two-month period after he died.

Fees are themselves a matter of controversy in FOIA. Nate Jones of the National Security Archive at George Washington University notes that FOIA cost the government \$441 million in fiscal 2014. Fees in that period were of \$4.2 million, covering less than 1 percent of that cost.

When a fee isn't possible, Leopold doesn't mind going to court. One of the most controversial aspects of FOIA when it was adopted 50 years ago was giving citizens the right to sue the government if they felt officials wrongly rejected their FOIA requests. Today, Leopold considers litigation a routine part of his reporting. He files a handful of cases annually. "It's like I have two full-time jobs," he says. "One is to be a reporter. One is to handle requests, file court papers and to understand the law."

Among his highest profile litigation, Leopold, along with other news organizations and activist groups, filed lawsuits against the State Department to gain access to Clinton's e-mails. Those cases resulted in a federal judge ordering the department to release Clinton's e-mails on a rolling basis. More recently, in June a judge ordered the Department of Defense to give Leopold reports prepared by the Office of Net Assessment, the Pentagon's in-house think tank which looks at possible future geopolitical scenarios. The decision came after officials rejected requests for an index of the reports, their title pages and summaries, and, finally, the reports themselves.

Reporters often must understand what occurs in government bureaucracies if they expect to obtain obscure correspondence that can lead to big stories. A few years ago, Craig Whitlock and other reporters at The Washington Post—as part of a Pulitzer-nominated series on secret American bases abroad—were trying to figure out where U.S. military drones were flying around the world. In the course of writing the series, Whitlock and his colleagues used aircraft accident investigation reports that the Air Force files when a vehicle is involved in

a significant crash. Initially, they were less concerned about where the drones were crashing than about what those accidents said about where they were taking off and landing.

Later, however, Whitlock realized he had overlooked a key takeaway in the accident reports. "It kind of dawned on me—'Gosh, these drones crash a lot,'" he says.

The accident reports were required under an Air Force regulation designed to keep taxpayers informed about the status of high-priced equipment in the field. There was well-established precedent for the Air Force to release them. So Whitlock started filing FOIA requests.

THE TOPIC WAS TIMELY. FOLLOWING intense corporate lobbying, Congress had recently allowed commercial drones to fly in American airspace. In the policy debates surrounding that move, drone opponents tended to focus on privacy and concerns about civil liberties. Nobody had looked deeply at whether drones were safe.

"More than 400 large U.S. military drones have crashed in major accidents around the world since 2001, a record of calamity that exposes the potential dangers of throwing open American skies to drone traffic, according to a year-long Washington Post investigation," wrote Whitlock in the June 2014 story "When Drones Fall from the Sky." "Since the outbreak of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, military drones have malfunctioned in myriad ways, plummeting from the sky because of mechanical breakdowns, human error, bad weather and other reasons, according to more than 50,000 pages of accident investigation reports and other records obtained by The Post under the Freedom of Information Act."

If "When Drones Fall from the Sky" exemplifies the potential of FOIA, it illustrates the pitfalls, too. Even though Whitlock is a top defense reporter and the Pentagon was willing to divulge the accident reports, he faced a long, uphill battle to obtain them. Every branch of the military has aircraft. Each classifies them in different ways. Nobody has a central clearinghouse for them. Consequently, triangulation—searching multiple sources to pinpoint information—has become de rigueur among journalists seeking public records.

Shawn Boburg, who recently left The (Bergen County, N.J.) Record for a job at The Washington Post, knows well how government officials can play games when it comes to public records. As neither a state nor federal agency, the Port Authority of New York & New Jersey isn't obligated to follow FOIA. New Jersey and New York's open records laws didn't apply to the authority, either, until this past summer, when officials in both states agreed they would. But Boburg had been covering the Port Authority long enough to know that its employees belonged to the New York State pension system. In 2011 he used New York's Freedom of Information Law (FOIL) to uncover how authority executives were receiving big payouts that inflated their compensation far beyond the Port Authority's publicly posted payroll.

Two years later, when the mayor of Fort Lee, New Jersey, accused Governor Chris Christie of closing lanes on the George Washington Bridge—one of the nation's busiest spans—Boburg hit a wall again when he asked the authority for documents related to officials' claims that the lanes were closed due to a traffic study. Knowing an indirect path was more likely to yield something, he used New Jersey's Open Public Records Act (OPRA) to acquire correspondence between Fort Lee and authority officials. Their one-sided communications confirmed that something suspicious was happening. The mayor of Fort Lee was desperately writing to the governor's office and other state officials, but they weren't answering.

"That silence told a story. Here is someone really sounding an alarm. And there's nothing," says Boburg, who describes FOIA as a tool that can be devastating in the right hands. "You need to know the processes, the bureaucratic quirks of a place, where power flows. Documents usually follow those processes. If you are not familiar with it, then you don't know what documents to look for. It goes back to beat reporting."

Whitlock and Boburg concluded that the difficulty in obtaining public records for their exposés suggested that FOIA and other public record laws were, in a sense, broken. It shouldn't be so hard, they say. Journalists shouldn't have to cover an agency for years to learn how to obtain information that any citizen has the right to access. "People have no chance of getting anything if they are just curious about the way the government operates," says Whitlock. "If you are just targeting it with these potshots asking for generic

things, it just gets routed to the wrong place or the bureaucrat doesn't want to help. They send it off to some file cabinet to die."

Many agencies find it difficult to follow the law, in part because the volume of information is overwhelming outdated collection and cataloging methodologies. James Holzer, who was a senior FOIA officer at Homeland Security before he became director of the Office of Government Information Services, the federal government's FOIA ombudsman's job, in August, says he was horrified when he first came to

the department, for the same reasons journalists are often frustrated with FOIA.

The Department of Homeland Security received almost 300,000 FOIA requests last year. Half of those were from people asking for their immigrant records for citizenship applications and other needs, he says. FOIA officers routinely redact information in those records that's related to attorney-client privilege. "I walked into an office and was handed a Sharpie and some tape and told, 'OK, get ready to redact,'" he says. "It was a ridiculous process." Before him were

piles of boxes and tens of thousands of pages of records. Officials would print out the records if they were electronic, box them up and ship them to his office, where he would scan them, upload them, print them out again, make redactions, and upload them again.

Slowly, the government is adopting 21st-century technology. The FBI, for example, is testing eFOIA, which allows users to request documents via a Web portal and then, if the request is accepted, view and download the documents.

INFORMATION WANTS TO BE FREE—SOMETIMES

A survey of FOIA laws around the world

NEARLY HALF OF nations lack a freedom of information law, and in many nations that do have one, enforcement is weak. According to the 2013 Global Right to Information Rating, a joint project of Access Info Europe and the Canada-based Centre for Law and Democracy, 102 out of the nearly 200 nations worldwide have enacted a freedom of information law. Five others have passed since the rating was published. Countries with such laws include:

SWEDEN

FOIA passed: 1766

The year 2016 marks the 250th anniversary of Sweden's Freedom of the Press Act, the world's first freedom of information law. It requires authorities to provide public access to all official records. While Sweden, like its Scandinavian neighbors, is viewed as a model of liberal governance, officials can utilize a number of secrecy clauses to bar access and there is no clear deadline for responding to requests.

AUSTRIA

FOIA passed: 1987

Under Austria's Constitution, public officials have a legal obligation to secrecy, one that is rarely outweighed by the country's right to information law. That law doesn't provide access to documents, only the right to receive details about what information public bodies hold. Furthermore, it applies only to the executive and administrative bodies, not the legislature or the judiciary.

JAPAN

FOIA passed: 1999

Starting in the 1980s, large metropolitan areas adopted local information disclosure ordinances, and by the time the national freedom of information law was enacted in 1999, close to 900 local governments and prefectures already had information disclosure guidelines.

UNITED KINGDOM

FOIA passed: 2000

An independent commission is examining proposals that would weaken the U.K.'s Freedom of Information Act.

The commission is considering introducing new fees for requests and expanding the number of exemptions. Journalists, civil society organizations, campaign groups, and individuals have responded with more than 30,000 public comments now being reviewed by the commission.

MEXICO

FOIA passed: 2002

Mexico has a dedicated website, Infomex, where requesters can not only file and appeal information requests to federal and local governments, but can access every request and public response ever processed electronically by the government. Mexico's Federal Institute for Access to Public Information is charged with enforcing the law.

INDIA

FOIA passed: 2005

Though India's Right to Information (RTI) Act has been lauded for its scope, the government is struggling with implementation. Right-to-information activists in the country face threats

of assault by corrupt officials and police. Since the country's RTI Act was passed in 2005, at least 45 right-to-information users and activists have been killed, and 250 others have been threatened or attacked, according to Human Rights Watch.

BRAZIL

FOIA passed: 2011

Brazil's access of information bill is similar to Mexico's exemplary law. Implementation has been slow, particularly in state and municipal governments where not all entities have Internet access. No agency oversees enforcement.

MOZAMBIQUE

FOIA passed: 2014

Mozambique became the 15th nation in Africa with a right to information law. (Sudan and Burkina Faso have since passed such a law.) It applies to state bodies, municipalities, and private bodies that benefit from public resources or undertake activities of public interest. Implementation has proven problematic.

—ERYN M. CARLSON

But critics have slammed the program because requesters need to provide a scan of a government ID before submitting requests, “so the FBI is confident in the identity of the requester.” The program is in marked contrast to states like Florida, where the appeals court last year ruled that presenting an ID to obtain records wasn’t necessary because it would have a “chilling effect” on access under the state’s Public Records Act.

Officials could likely learn from journalists using technology to streamline FOIA and other public records laws. TRAC compiles decades’ worth of data ranging from Justice Department cases to wealth statistics based on income tax returns. Funded in part through subscriptions, the organization has waged long legal battles with government entities to collect information that it compiles into easy-to-read statistics.

TRAC’s databases, like those of the Center for Responsive Politics’ OpenSecrets, provide context for stories. But TRAC’s proprietary information is much deeper and more detailed. Currently, journalists can go to online databases like Pacer to find individual cases, but TRAC’s system categorizes cases in ways that journalists can use, like how many specific charges were brought in which district. The government offers no equivalent service. Reporters can see how many drug convictions a particular U.S. attorney might have won in a given year and whom he or she prosecuted, for example, versus how many white-collar crimes the same official pursued or declined to pursue.

Whereas Leopold’s impulse is to expose, TRAC co-founder and co-director David Burnham, a former New York Times reporter, views the clearinghouse and its mission in classic watchdog terms. “The point of FOIA is not to bring lawsuits. FOIA is to improve governance. It’s to get hard information. The real purpose is to get concrete documentation so you can get good governance,” Burnham says.

LAUNCHED IN 2010, MUCKROCK helps requesters write and file requests—providing sample letters for requesters, contact info for public records officers at all levels of government and, most importantly, tracking the responses, the mounds of data, the rejection letters, and other correspondence that arise in FOIA requests, at prices that start at \$20 for four requests. “It’s not so much the problem of filing,”



Redacted government documents provided in response to a FOIA request Jason Leopold filed

says MuckRock editor J. Patrick Brown. “It’s a matter of keeping track of what happens after you file it. We try to keep front and center how we keep track of everything.”

The website has worked with The Marshall Project, The Boston Globe, and other news outlets as well as countless individuals who have filed FOIA requests through the site to accumulate nearly 700,000 pages of government data. All of those documents are posted for the public.

MuckRock also crowdfunds projects, raising \$1,200, for example, to help No Boston 2024, a local activist group that helped sink the city’s Olympics bid. With the help of crowdfunding, the group used MuckRock to dig up documents that culminated with Boston Magazine reporter Kyle Clauss obtaining a copy of the Olympics bid book that showed billions in costs, including that of a 60,000-seat stadium, that organizers and public officials weren’t disclosing to the public, as well as the Olympics planners’ intention of seeking tax increment financing to cover some costs.

Clauss argues against reporters who insist that familiarity with a beat is essential to capitalizing on public records laws. “I didn’t have the sourcing that a lot of my colleagues and competitors did,” says Clauss, who moved to the magazine from The Lowell Sun, a small daily, a few months before the Olympics controversy. “I would not have been able to cozy up to folks or get sources that quickly. New developments were happening every day. I just wanted to get straight to the info. I knew there was so much spin going on, if we could just get some primary information, that would set some truth to it.”

Despite his success, Clauss, like most other journalists, was more cynical about open public records laws af-

ter his experience covering the Boston story. FOIA doesn’t apply to Congress. In Massachusetts, the legislature as well as the governor’s office claim to be exempt from state sunshine laws. A bill to improve the state’s law—including adopting the federal practice of forcing state and local governments to pay for requesters’ legal fees if a court finds that they unlawfully withheld info—is now pending in the legislature.

Few FOIA experts expect much to change soon. Sobel, the attorney, thinks special courts devoted to FOIA, like housing or probate courts, might expedite disputes. Holzer at the Office of Government Information Services recommends more technology, like online FOIA request applications. Department of Justice officials this summer announced the launch of a series of pilot programs called Release to One, Release to All, that would make public the result of almost any FOIA request. The idea is to disseminate information that’s public to a wide audience, but scoop-conscious journalists have panned the idea.

University of Arizona’s Cuillier recommends codifying in law the presumption of openness that Obama championed at the beginning of his tenure, giving the Office of Government Information Services more resources—currently it only has 10 staffers—and imposing time limits for agencies to cite exemptions. Those measures probably won’t overcome the bureaucratic culture that naturally veers to resisting disclosure, he admits. But it would make it easier for citizens who must resort to suing the government to challenge denials. “We need to make access to information a constitutional right in this country,” Cuillier says. “We need to make it a human right, like it is in Europe, like having clean water and not being tortured.” ■

Contrarians At the Gates Journalism's gatekeeping function is waning. What's the new role for the press in the age of distributed content, ad blockers, and Donald Trump?

BY JOSHUA BENTON

EACH YEAR SINCE TIM BERNERS-Lee put the first website online in 1991 has brought significant change to the news business. Looking back on 2015, the news about news was a little darker than usual, with tech companies extending their lead over publishers in determining how news reaches audiences. Even the shiny new digital start-ups that have seen nothing but growth the past few years started to get a little anxious, counting on consolidation and acquisitions to protect themselves from the coming shakeout of the online advertising business. Here's a look back at one man's view of the biggest areas of change in 2015—and where they'll take us in 2016.

The year of distributed content: This was the trend above all others in 2015. Over the past decade, publisher websites lost their position as the place users headed for news online. First came search engines (but really just Google); then came social media (but really just Facebook). With readers' attention committed elsewhere—the average U.S. Facebook user spends 27 hours a month there—publishers bet on using social media as a traffic generator, often succeeding.

But 2015 was the year the platforms took their power to its logical next step. Why

serve as a channel for publishers to share links when you can push them to publish their content directly on your platform? Facebook's Instant Articles was the most prominent (and important) example, but we also saw Apple use the iPhone's success to build its own News platform, and Snapchat use its hold on young people's attention to get publishers to make custom content for its Discover.

There's a good reason for platforms to be interested in news: News consumption is a habit, and if people think of your app as a place to get news, they're likely to return to it more regularly. But the question in 2015 was whether it was a good deal for news organizations. The promise of global reach, faster load times, and a monetization strategy drew nearly every major American news publisher into at least one of these new products. Are they accelerating the decline of their own power to connect directly with audiences? Or are they simply following where attention has shifted and hoping to build sustainable relationships sharecropping on Silicon Valley's land? We'll find out a lot more about those questions in 2016.

The rise of ad blockers: Talk to any old newspaper hand from the business side and you'll hear it: Ads were just as important to customers as the news that flowed around them. That city hall investigation could sit nicely next to a department store ad, each reaching distinct but overlapping audiences, each reinforcing the value of the product.

That symbiosis never quite translated online. Today's ads load too slowly, use up too much of your mobile data, jank up your reading experience, and track you in ways you'd rather they not.

In 2015, a rising share of readers decided to install ad blockers as a clumsy solution. In September, for the first time, Apple allowed them to be installed on iPhones and iPads, chipping away at the most valuable slice of publishers' mobile customers. With so many news sites relying almost existentially on advertising revenue, it's a terrifying thought that those trend lines will continue up in 2016; many American sites could start to see the numbers some of their European

peers do, with upwards of 30 percent of users blocking ads.

Publishers say they want to make their advertising better, which is welcome. Addressing the issue of ad blockers will be high on their agenda this year.

Hints of big changes in TV: As a former newspaper reporter, I was a little miffed that my line of work got disrupted before our friends in television news. A tangle of factors—the higher production cost of video, the web of relationships between cable companies, networks, and producers—have let TV remain a money-printing machine.

We saw a few things in 2015 that suggested that tangle is unraveling more quickly than before. Networks high- (HBO) and middle-brow (CBS) started selling their content directly to consumers. A new generation of digital media players from Apple, Amazon, and Google shortened the distance between Web video and your flatscreen. Cord-cutters and cord-nevers—young people who've never paid for cable and think of their laptop or phone as their primary screen for video—continue to grow in numbers. (Cable stalwart ESPN has lost 7 percent of its paying subscribers over the past two years.) Even the NFL—the keystone of American paid live television—started talking about selling broadcast rights packages to streaming companies.

There'll still be plenty of money in TV, of course, but it's unclear what role news will play. If our content comes increasingly from Netflix and Amazon rather than NBC or ABC, where does local news fit in? My concern is that the answer is nowhere.

Podcasts in full flower: Season two of "Serial" barely caught the end of 2015, but the podcasting renaissance did just fine without its flagship. New start-ups found new funding and launched new shows; a few public media stalwarts like WNYC bet big on podcasts as a key area of expansion. Perhaps the biggest story was the continued exodus of top talent—often frustrated with station politics and hierarchy—from public radio to the newcomers.

The big question for 2016: Will podcast consumption continue to happen in



Presidential candidate Donald Trump has upended the ways the media and political campaigns have traditionally interacted

mostly open platforms—places like Apple’s Podcasts app that any content creator can get access to? Or will it shift to individual apps like Acast or Midroll’s Howl that can offer user experience benefits or a more robust business model?

A so-so year for wearables: The Apple Watch came out in 2015, and it quickly became the biggest smartwatch on the market. (Apple doesn’t release figures, but outside estimates are that somewhere around 12 million have been sold.) As someone who’s worn one since launch, I can attest that getting breaking news notifications on your wrist can be a nice little addition to your life, but it’s far from transformative. Perhaps future generations of wearables will make their usefulness more clear, but at this point the energy in wearables in 2016 is all centered on virtual reality headsets, with plenty of news organizations investing

in immersive content. I’m bearish on VR for news, but perhaps we’ll see headsets get light enough that they can play a larger role.

A new/old kind of owner: A few years back there was a wave of billionaires buying up newspapers—John Henry in Boston, Jeff Bezos in Washington, D.C., and Glen Taylor in Minneapolis. The most notable new newspaper owner in 2015 was Sheldon Adelson, whose secret-then-not-secret purchase of the Las Vegas Review-Journal seemed to augur a new reality: Newspapers are so cheap and America’s wealthy so rich that snapping up the local daily for political purposes is a newly attractive option.

A newspaper owner with political intentions is not a new phenomenon, of course. But after many decades where the big fear was faceless corporate chain ownership, the Adelson buy could be the start of a return to an earlier 20th-century model.

Meanwhile, in the capital, Bezos’ promise of “runway” for The Washington Post has led that paper to new heights, with engineers integrated into the newsroom, record-breaking traffic, and a new swagger in its longstanding rivalry with The New York Times. Whichever side you’re on, we’re all better off with another strong news source.

Trump breaks the system: Finally, 2015 was the year that Donald Trump’s candidacy seemed to break what we thought were all the rules on how the media and a political campaign can interact. Trump has proven to be a master of social media, using it to connect to his base of supporters without relying on TV advertising. He’s shifted the rules of cable TV, becoming such an audience draw that channels let him call in for appearances they’d expect other candidates to show up for. His many untruths seem impervious to the fact-checking infrastructure news outlets have built up, and he’s shoved ideas once considered fringe in mainstream media squarely into the common discourse. He’s a one-man filter bubble.

Journalists have had to figure out their own ways to respond, to reassert their place in informing the public. Their old role as gatekeepers has waned, for good and for ill. What’s the right role for the press, old and new, in that context? The decisions journalists reach on that question in 2016 will go a long way toward determining their position in public life going forward. ■

Joshua Benton, a 2008 Nieman Fellow, is the founding director of the Nieman Journalism Lab

The growing number of cord-cutters and cord-nevers may shake up the TV world this year

Blinded by Science

In “A Survival Guide to the Misinformation Age,” David J. Helfand argues that journalists must better understand how science works in order to separate real breakthroughs from hype

BY DAVID J. HELFAND

ASTRONOMER AND LONGTIME PROFESSOR David J. Helfand has taught scientific habits of mind to generations of undergraduates at Columbia University. His first book draws on his teaching to elucidate key concepts of data analysis and quantitative reasoning useful to journalists in writing about science and evaluating scientific papers.

“Building a Cathedral”

SCIENCE IS NEITHER A COLLECTION of unquestioned facts nor a simple recipe for generating more facts. Rather, it is a process of inquiring about Nature, and given that Nature is not only much bigger than humans but has also been around a lot longer, it should come as no surprise that we haven't finished the job: there is no complete scientific description of the universe and all it contains. The gaps in our knowledge are

Excerpted from “A Survival Guide to the Misinformation Age” by David J. Helfand, to be published in February 2016. Copyright © 2016 David J. Helfand. Used by arrangement with the publisher. All rights reserved.

what make science so engaging.

Science is an intensely creative activity, but it differs in several important ways from other creative human activities such as art, music, or writing. Science is teleological. It has a goal toward which it strives—an ever-more accurate and all-encompassing understanding of the universe. Artistic endeavors do not share such a goal. Sculptors since the time of Michelangelo have not been striving to improve upon the accuracy of his sculpture of David. Writers have not been searching for four hundred years to find arrangements of words more universal than “A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” Scientists have, however, been working steadily on Galileo's ideas of motion, expanding their scope and improving their accuracy to build a more comprehensive model of motion through space and time.

Science and art also differ in regard to the role of the individual. Artistic creativity largely expresses one person's vision. Contrary to some caricatures, science is a highly social activity. Scientists have lots of conferences, journals, websites, and coffee hours—they are constantly talking and writing, exchanging ideas, collaborating and competing to add another small tile to the mosaic of scientific understanding. It is from

the conventions of this social web that the self-correcting nature of science emerges.

At any given moment, many “scientific” ideas are wrong. But as the last 400 years have shown, science as a whole has made tremendous progress. The reason for this progress is that wrong ideas in science never triumph in the end. Nature is always standing by as the arbiter and, while the aether may have survived for more than two millennia, as soon as the physical and mathematical tools were in place to measure its properties, its absence was readily discovered and accepted.

The enterprise of science has developed several habits and techniques for enhancing the pace of correcting false ideas. Perhaps foremost among these is skepticism. Although many people regard skepticism rather negatively, it is a scientist's best quality. Indeed, it is essential to be skeptical of one's data, always to look for ways in which a measurement might be biased or confounded by some external effect. It is even more essential to be skeptical of one's own models and to recognize them as temporary approximations that are likely to be superseded by better descriptions of Nature. When one's data agree with one's model, euphoria must be tempered by a thorough and skeptical critique of both.

When the results of one's experiment or observation are ready for public display, community skepticism springs into action. The description of one's work in a scientific publication must provide enough detail to allow other scientists to reproduce one's results—they're skeptical and want to make sure you did it right. The published article itself is the result of a formal skeptical review by one or more referees chosen by journal editors for their expertise in a certain field and their objective, critical, skeptical approach. These days, instant publication of results via the Internet often precedes formal publication in a journal, exposing the author to dozens or hundreds of unsolicited, skeptical reviews from those who scan new postings each morning.

All this skepticism screens out a lot of nonsense right at the start. Furthermore, it optimizes the ability of both the original au-

Science is much more like building a cathedral than blowing one up



Examples of Bad Science

VESTED CORPORATE INTERESTS AND the politicians who serve them, biblical literalists, and misguided consumers are not the only generators and consumers of bad science. People who wear the mantle of science but who have had little experience in scientific research—most notably medical clinicians—and full-fledged research scientists themselves also produce bad science.

The largest amount of bad science being produced today—and probably that with the largest impact—comes from small clinical and preclinical studies (e.g., the use of mouse models or cancer cell cultures) in hospitals, universities, and medical schools. The quality of this work is compromised by small sample sizes, poor experimental designs, and weak statistical reasoning; add a healthy dose of publication bias and the results are truly appalling.

Dr. C. Glenn Begley was head of global cancer research at the biotech company Amgen for a decade. Over that period, he selected fifty-three articles with supposedly “landmark” status (major results, trumpeted as such by the journals that published them and the media that reported on them) and assembled an Amgen team to attempt to reproduce the results. They found that forty-seven of the fifty-three studies (89 percent!) were irreproducible—the results were simply wrong. More disturbingly, when the Amgen team contacted the papers’ original authors in an attempt to understand the discrepancies, some would cooperate only on the condition that the Amgen scientists sign confidentiality agreements forbidding them to disclose any data that cast doubt on the original findings, thus assuring that their phony results would stand in perpetuity in the scientific literature.

A year earlier, a team at the big pharmaceutical firm Bayer AG attempted to replicate forty-seven different cancer study results and found more than three-quarters of them to be irreproducible. The article that reported this result was appropriately titled “Believe It or Not.”

The vast majority of these articles are not examples of deliberate fraud, however. As Begley and Lee Ellis state:

The academic system and peer-review process tolerates and perhaps even inadvertently encourages such conduct. To obtain funding, a job, promotion

thor and other scientists to root out errors and advance understanding. The constant communication through both formal and informal means rapidly disseminates new ideas so they can be woven quickly into the fabric of our current models, offering further opportunities to find inconsistencies and to eliminate them. This highly social enterprise with this highly skeptical ethos is central to the rapid growth of scientific understanding in the modern era.

My celebration of skepticism, emphasis on falsifiability, and insistence on the temporary nature of models should not be misconstrued as supporting the popular notion that science consists of an endless series of eureka moments. The news media are committed devotees of this false view. Each week, the science section of the New York Times needs half a dozen “news” stories, and if they can use words like “stunning,” “revolutionary,” and “theory overturned” in the headlines, so much the better. Scientists are complicit in this misrepresentation, all too easily using phrases such as “breakthrough,” “astonishing,” and the like, not only when talking to reporters but even

when writing grant proposals and journal articles. Some philosophers of science share the blame by concentrating their studies on “paradigm shifts” and “scientific revolutions.” Science isn’t really like that.

Science is much more like building a cathedral than blowing one up. Thousands of hands place the stones, weave the tapestries, tile the frescos, and assemble the stained-glass windows. Occasionally, a new idea might require the disassembly of some work already completed—invention of the flying buttress allowed the walls to go higher, so a new roof was needed. Very infrequently, on timescales typically measured in centuries, a genuinely new conception of the cathedral’s architecture emerges. While a major supporting wall or facade may need to be removed, we use many of the stones again, rehang some of the old tapestries, and always enclose most of the old building within the new. Our cathedral gets larger and ever more ecumenical, drawing a greater swath of the universe within its doors as the weaving, the tiling, and the stonemasonry goes on. It is extraordinarily gratifying and important work.

or tenure, researchers need a strong publication record, often including a first-authored high-impact publication. Journal editors, reviewers and grant-review committees often look for a scientific finding that is simple, clear and complete—a “perfect” story. It is therefore tempting for investigators to submit selected data sets for publication, or even to massage data to fit the underlying hypothesis.

The conclusion is inescapable: this work represents bad science. It fails the values of skepticism and disinterest, as well as the authors’ responsibility to attempt to falsify their results. Indeed, I would go so far as to say it is not science, and the journal editors and funding agencies and faculty committees that allow it to persist are simply feeding the antiscientific and anti-intellectual tendencies of society to the peril of us all.

The systematic mess discussed above is, we are told, largely a matter of individual misunderstanding of what true scientific habits of mind entail and the social pressures of the academic system. Worse still is outright fraud. Often attributed to the same academic pressures such as the need for jobs, grants, and promotion to tenure, there is little doubt that the number of incidents of outright fraudulent publications is growing.

A study by C.F. Fang, R.G. Steen and A. Casadevall in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences examined all 2,047 papers that had been retracted after being published and listed in the National Library of Medicine’s MEDLINE database before May 3, 2012. They found 436 cases of errors, some caught by the original authors and some caught by others; given that the database contained roughly twenty million publications at the time, this is an error rate most occupations would envy (although there is no reason to think that every error has been caught, given the reproducibility studies cited previously). More disturbingly, they found 201 cases of plagiarism and 291 cases of duplicate publications (some-

The impact of scientific fraud on the overall scientific enterprise is minuscule: its incidence is very low



Anti-vaccine protesters, pointing to now discredited research, rally in Sacramento, California

times called self-plagiarism); both instances represent unacceptable departures from ethical norms in the academic world (scientific or otherwise). The largest fraction of papers retracted, however—888 (43.4 percent)—were because of outright fraud or suspected fraud. Based on these data, the authors claimed this percentage has risen ten-fold since 1975.

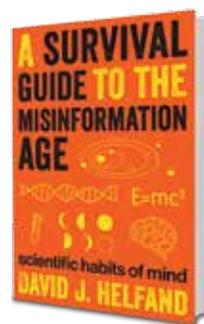
A separate study, “A Comprehensive Survey of Retracted Articles from the Scholarly Literature,” also published in 2012, went beyond the biomedical sciences to include forty-two major bibliographic databases across academic fields. The authors of this study documented 4,449 retracted articles originally published between 1928 and 2011. The headline-grabbing nugget from the study’s abstract was that the number of articles retracted per year had increased by a factor of 19.06 (a number clearly reported to too many significant digits) between 2001 and 2010; the increase dropped to a factor of eleven when repeat offenders and the overall growth in papers published were included in the calculation.

While all incidents of scientific fraud are abhorrent, none of the media coverage noted the tiny fraction of papers involved and the even smaller fraction of scientists. Repeat offenders are responsible for a significant fraction of retractions; for example, most of the 123 papers retracted from

Acta Crystallographica Section E were attributable to two authors. And of the 76,644 articles published in the Journal of the American Chemical Society between 1980 and 2011, twenty-four (0.03 percent) were retracted; the numbers for Applied Physics Letters were even better: 83,838 papers, of which fifteen (0.018 percent) were withdrawn (not all for fraud). If all our social enterprises had a failure rate of less than 0.1 percent and upheld ethical norms 99.982 percent of the time, it is likely the world would be a better place.

The impact of scientific fraud (which again is different from the bad science described previously) on the overall scientific enterprise is minuscule: its incidence is very low, much of it is found in relatively obscure journals and uncited papers, and

the self-correcting aspects of the enterprise are good at rooting it out. Much greater damage can be done to society at large, however; an example, the infamous Andrew Wakefield paper on the measles, mumps, and rubella vaccine, will be explored further. Furthermore, fraud damages the reputation of the scientific enterprise. It can be used as an excuse to dismiss any inconvenient scientific results and can lead to a decrease in support for public research funding and a general rise in anti-science attitudes. ■



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Columbia University Press*

1969

Paul Hemphill, who authored 16 books and hundreds of essays before his death in 2009, has been inducted posthumously into the Georgia Writers Hall of Fame. Known for his examination of topics particularly relevant to the South, including country music, Hemphill came to prominence as a columnist at *The Atlanta Journal*.

1989

Rick Tulsy has co-founded a nonprofit journalism organization, *Injustice Watch*, devoted to in-depth research into systemic flaws causing inequities. The site launched in late 2015. Previously, Tulsy was director of Northwestern's *Medill Watchdog*.

1991

Kabral Blay-Amihere is the author of a new book, *"I Spoke for Freedom: History of Politics of the Ghana Press,"* an examination of the media and society in Ghana. Blay-Amihere, who is currently the chairman of the National Media Commission of Ghana, has written four other books.

1995

Lou Ureneck has been inducted into the Maine Press Association's Hall of Fame. He was recognized for his career at papers in the state, including the *Portland Press Herald*, the *Evening Express*, and the *Maine Sunday Telegram*. A journalism professor at Boston University, Ureneck has written three books.

2003

Susan Smith Richardson's *Chicago Reporter*, where she is editor and publisher, has received a two-year \$500,000 grant from the MacArthur Foundation to support strategic planning. The grant is the largest the nonprofit investigative news organization, which focuses on race and poverty, has received since it was founded in 1972.

2005

Joshua Hammer has penned a new book titled *"The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu: And Their Race to Save the World's Most Precious Manuscripts,"* which details an operation to save thousands of volumes from Al Qaeda militants. The book will be published by Simon & Schuster in April.

Cheryl Carpenter has been named Washington bureau chief for McClatchy Newspapers, where she will lead the bureau's 40-member team. Previously, Carpenter was managing editor of *The Charlotte (N.C.) Observer*, a McClatchy paper.

Absar Alam has been appointed chairman of the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority, which issues licenses and regulates the country's private electronic media. Alam has written for *The New York Times* and *The Boston Globe* on topics such as the 2005 Kashmir earthquake and the war on terror.

2010

Liz Mineo has joined the staff of Harvard's official news outlet, the *Harvard Gazette*, as a general assignment writer. Mineo formerly worked for *The MetroWest Daily News* in Framingham, Massachusetts.

2012

Maggie Jones is a visiting assistant professor of writing at the University of Pittsburgh for the 2015-2016 academic year. Jones, who is a contributing writer at *The New York Times Magazine*, is teaching both undergraduate and graduate courses in narrative nonfiction and journalism.

2013

Blair Kamin's book *"Gates of Harvard Yard"* will be published by Princeton Architectural Press in May. Kamin is the architecture critic for the *Chicago Tribune*. Essays in the new book were previously published as a Nieman Foundation e-book with the same title.

Ludovic Blecher is the new manager of Google's Digital News Initiative innovation fund, which will support online journalism experiments in Europe for the next three years. Blecher is the former editor in chief of *Liberation.fr*.

2015

Miguel Paz has joined the faculty of City University of New York's Graduate School of Journalism. He is a lecturer specializing in data journalism and multimedia storytelling. Paz is founder of the data journalism website *Poderopedia*, and he has taught journalism in Colombia as well as at four universities in his native Chile.

Elaine Díaz Rodríguez has launched an independent news outlet, *Periodismo de Barrio*, in Cuba. The online publication focuses on weather and natural disasters, a critical topic in a country that is frequently threatened by serious tropical storms.



UNEARTHING BURIED HISTORY

Chinese journalist Yang Jisheng is being honored with the Louis M. Lyons Award for Conscience and Integrity in Journalism. He was selected by the current class of Nieman Fellows.

Yang's groundbreaking book "Tombstone: The Great Chinese Famine 1958-1962," banned in China, documents one of the greatest human catastrophes of the 20th century. The Great Leap Forward policy led to the death of some 36 million Chinese, primarily by starvation but also torture and murder.

In a statement, the Nieman Fellows said: "Yang's work speaks to the effort of every journalist globally who faces enormous obstacles in reporting. ... He is a role model to all who seek to document the dark and difficult struggles of humankind."

Why Foreign News Matters

Why do we focus so often on the negative? And what stories do we miss when we do?

WHEN TYPHOON Haiyan, one of the strongest typhoons ever recorded, slammed into the Philippines in 2013, I rushed there from Bangkok to report on it with my colleagues from The Associated Press. In the city of Tacloban, we found an anxious population with little food or water living amid a sea of rubble. As journalists, we had a duty to explain what happened and to convey the sheer desperation we saw.

It was a heart-wrenching story to cover. I remember visiting a hospital without electricity and finding a mother and father pushing air into the lungs of their newborn daughter with a small hand pump. They knew that if they stopped, their infant would die. After writing about their plight, I checked in on the couple and learned the sad postscript: the baby did not make it.

At times like that, it's easy to view everything through a lens of despair. Haiyan, after all, was ultimately a tale of tragedy. In that first week of reporting, though, one detail kept making it into my notebook, but not my stories: nearly everybody I met—families who lost everything—greeted me with smiles. Of course they were in pain, and tears welled in their eyes during interviews, but the smiles were part of something I didn't understand until I stumbled upon a group of boys playing basketball on a patch of broken concrete and dirt—a culture of resilience. Their court, it turned out, had been erected from the ruins of their own homes,

and it was one of the first things they rebuilt. After writing a story about this inspiring defiance in the face of disaster, I began thinking about the media's portrayal not just of tragedy, but also about our role as foreign correspondents. Specifically: Why do we tend to focus so often on the negative? And what are we overlooking when we do?

I began my career nearly two decades ago as a stringer in Burundi, a small Central African nation which was in the midst of a civil war. I moved on to Rwanda and Congo, and joined the AP in West Africa in 2001. I've worked all over the globe since then, and covered a lot of bad news along the way—from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq to natural disasters like the 2011 tsunami in Japan.

What drives me most is the belief that important things going on in the world need to be shared. But explaining historic events—transporting people through the power of storytelling—carries with it great responsibility. It matters a lot how that “first draft” of history is written, not only because our work influences policymakers, but because it leaves lasting impressions on a public trying to make sense of the world. Often those impressions are negative, though, and places like Africa and the Middle East are

Todd Pitman



Places like Africa and the Middle East are all too often reduced to violent disaster zones

reduced to violent disaster zones—a long-time complaint of the people who live there.

My Nieman fellowship has given me the chance to slow down and see how foreign news is projected into the U.S., and the glimpses I see—snapshots of negative news devoid of any sense of normalcy—don't accurately portray life abroad. I've found myself wondering how we can change that.

Steven Pinker, the renowned Harvard psychology professor and author of the 2011 book, “The Better Angels of Our Nature,” argued in a recent campus lecture that violence worldwide is actually at an all-time low. It's an argument he backs with statistical evidence.

So why does it feel like the world we live in is more dangerous than ever? Part of the answer is, of course, us—the press. When we report on a terrorist attack in Bamako or Beirut or Paris, those tragedies are swiftly transmitted across the planet. Faraway events can feel close, making life appear more tenuous than it really is.

When I asked Pinker about this phenomenon, he suggested the media tone down its coverage of violence. I don't believe we should ever shy away from devoting resources to covering bad news. But as foreign correspondents, we need to put our coverage into perspective and ask questions that go beyond the casualties: What are we missing? What are we leaving out? And most importantly: Does our reporting reflect the full scope of life in the regions we cover abroad? Where are the painters, the poets—the positive—in what we report?

The news, as fellow Nieman Christa Case Bryant told me, is not just something that happens, it's what we as journalists decide is important. That's a crucial point to remember. Because despite the fact that pressures on our industry have cut news budgets worldwide and reduced the number of foreign correspondents, we nevertheless have the power to reach more people than at any other time in history—which is why it matters so much what we say. ■

Todd Pitman, a 2016 Nieman Fellow, is Bangkok bureau chief for The Associated Press



The Nieman Foundation's panel discussion at New York University on ad blocking brought together, from left, Nieman Lab director Joshua Benton; The Atlantic publisher Hayley Romer; Digital Content Next CEO Jason Kint; Brendan Riordan-Butterworth of the Interactive Advertising Bureau; David Carroll, associate professor of media design at The New School; and Frédéric Montagnon, CEO of Secret Media

[+ NIEMANLAB.ORG](http://niemanlab.org)

“[The rise of ad blocking software] is forcing us to make changes that hopefully make us get better as a publisher, as an industry.”

—HAYLEY ROMER
PUBLISHER OF THE ATLANTIC

NiemanReports

From the Archives

January 7 marked the one-year anniversary of the deadly attack on French satirical weekly Charlie Hebdo. “The Offending Art,” our Winter 2015 cover story, explores the challenges facing political cartoonists around the world at a time when the Web helps them engage new audiences and sidestep censorship.

NiemanLab

Predictions for Journalism 2016

Will there be a new dawn in social newsgathering? How about finally getting notifications that know you? Or maybe it's the year podcasts will own radio? Every year some of the smartest people in journalism and digital media are asked what they think is coming in the next 12 months. Among the more than 100 people who offered predictions are The Marshall Project's Bill Keller, NPR's Michael Oreskes, and former Washington Post digital visionary Cory Haik.

NiemanStoryboard

Nine Rules for Creative Work

Esquire writer Chris Jones lays out his philosophy of writing. Using the travails of an auto mechanic as a guiding metaphor, Jones stresses the importance of discipline, commitment, and confidence.

Annotation Tuesday

In “Emptying the Tower of David, the World's Tallest Ghetto,” Boris Muñoz, a Venezuelan journalist who now lives in the U.S., views the unfinished Tower of David slum as a symbol for all that's wrong with his native country.

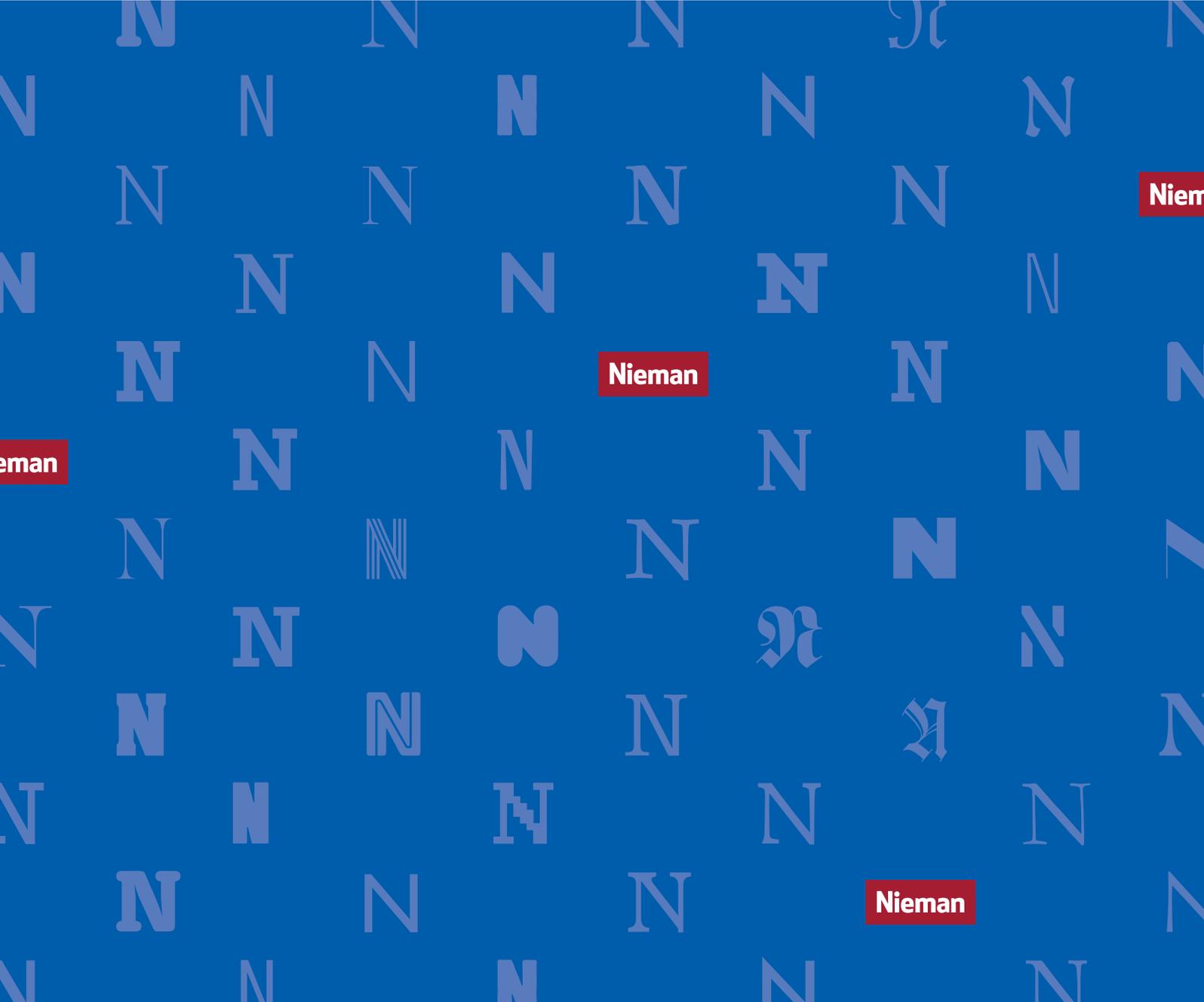
5 Questions: Amy Ellis Nutt

In writing her new book about a transgender girl, “Becoming Nicole: The Transformation of an American Family,” Pulitzer Prize winner Amy Ellis Nutt took a cue from Charles Dickens and his mastery of the cliffhanger.

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