

NIEMAN REPORTS

**Nieman**

**Violence, political attacks, layoffs ...  
and still doing vital work**

**JOURNALISM  
UNDER PRESSURE**

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**Shira Springer** (page 16) has been a sports journalist for more than 20 years. Formerly a member of the sports staff at The Boston Globe, she now covers stories at the intersection of sports and society for NPR and WBUR. She also writes regular columns on women’s sports for the Globe and The SportsBusiness Journal. In addition to writing and working in public radio, Springer teaches sports journalism at Boston University.



**Susan Stellin** (page 40) is a reporter and an adjunct professor at The New School, teaching a course on ethics and the history of media. She recently completed a master’s degree in public health at Columbia University and is the co-author of “Chancers,” a memoir about her husband’s struggle with addiction, incarceration, and recovery. She has written for The New York Times, New York magazine, The Guardian, and many other publications.



Days after a mass shooting at The Capital newspaper, staff members march in the 4th of July parade in Annapolis, Maryland in 2018

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## Errol Morris, Steve Bannon, and American Discourse “What does it mean for journalism when we cannot examine a subject without appearing to promote it?”

BY ANN MARIE LIPINSKI

FOR THE FIRST time in his long career, Academy Award winner Errol Morris has made a film that no one will distribute. Perhaps distributors don't like the subject—Stephen K. Bannon, former chief strategist for President Donald Trump. The fact that we can't quite tell is a feature of this political moment. It is also a problem for journalism.

This is not the first Morris film to document a polarizing subject. “The Fog of War,” his 2003 movie about former U.S. Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara, won an Oscar for best documentary feature. A decade later, “The Unknown Known” portrayed another defense secretary, Donald Rumsfeld. Morris did not set out to direct a trilogy, but “American Dharma,” his unsettling Bannon film, is at home with these earlier documentaries examining men who had, he says, “a destructive effect on America.”

But a form that was a Morris signature—long interviews with single subjects—has found itself in a purgatory governed by emerging rules about “normalizing” men like Bannon, someone whose inflammatory

populism fueled Breitbart News before he imported it to the White House. “American Dharma” has now become its own unknown known, something we know that we do not know, a film generating plenty of coverage and opinions but very few screenings.

“It's not a First Amendment [issue] because it isn't the government suppressing free speech, but what is it?” asked Morris. “What is it when we're just afraid to actually engage views that we find contrary to the way we would like to see the world?”

I invited Morris to the Nieman Foundation after arranging a campus screening of the documentary. One journalist cautioned me that showing the film could be “controversial” for Nieman. Someone asked if I thought there would be protests. I was bewildered by any suggestion that journalists should not see this work for themselves. Apparently others in the community felt the same; on a freezing Friday night, long lines of filmgoers assembled, and a second screening was arranged.

The film is only 96 minutes, but when we met with Morris, we talked for over two hours. Some aligned with a Variety critic

who called “American Dharma” a “toothless bromance,” others with an IndieWire reviewer who said, “This may be the first real window into what it takes to talk back.” But far richer than reviews has been the deep debate about how journalists calibrate our stories to break through in a moment of extreme polarization, an important conversation made possible, ironically, by viewing a film that few can see.

What does it mean for journalism when we cannot examine a subject without appearing to promote it?

Morris recalled screening his 1999 documentary “Mr. Death: The Rise and Fall of Fred A. Leuchter Jr.” to a group of college students who appeared to be swayed by the subject's Holocaust denials. “That was not my intent,” he said wryly. Before releasing the movie, he added direct denunciations of Leuchter, an edit he still laments for telling people what to think rather than asking them to think.

“To me the ironies were so unbelievably strong that you want them just to wash over people,” he said. “You don't want to editorialize about them. If they're incapable of seeing these ironies, then what do you do?”

Some argue that perilous political times have obviated traditional journalistic inquiry and that “American Dharma” should have conveyed a more combative stance toward Bannon—despite the fact that Morris is more visibly present and critical than in any documentary he's made. The filmmaker was despondent. “I don't know what I'm



**We seem in search of a new journalistic rhetoric, and the possibilities are both promising and perilous**

## “We were inundated with calls from other survivors” Lyons award winner unwinds her paper's Larry Nassar investigation

The Indianapolis Star investigation that led to the imprisonment of Dr. Larry Nassar began with a tip. In March 2016 a source suggested that reporter Marisa Kwiatkowski look at how USA Gymnastics handles sexual abuse allegations. “That source pointed me toward a lawsuit in Georgia and documents that he said might soon be sealed by the judge,” Kwiatkowski, the winner of the 2019 Louis M. Lyons Award for Conscience and

Integrity in Journalism, said during a talk after the award ceremony February 7 at the Nieman Foundation. In presenting the award to Kwiatkowski, the Nieman class of 2019 cited her “relentless efforts to give voice to the afflicted through her reporting.”

The documents weren't available online and the only way to get them that day was to hop on a plane to Atlanta. She returned with almost a thousand pages of records. “What makes this

investigation somewhat different and somewhat unusual from a lot of other investigations I've done is that we knew immediately

**Marisa Kwiatkowski**



KATHERINE TAYLOR  
OPPOSITE: KIRSTY WIGGLESWORTH/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS



Filmmaker Errol Morris has faced criticism for his documentary about Steve Bannon

supposed to do. I'm supposed to infantilize my audience? I'm supposed to just play to what's going to make them happy or feel better about themselves?”

He added: “I learned maybe it's not possible to make movies like this anymore and that I shouldn't make another political film ever again.”

Morris's troubles with the film coincided with New Yorker editor David Remnick's decision last fall to first invite then disinvite Bannon from the magazine's annual festival. The same week Morris premiered “American Dharma” to an ovation at the Venice International Film Festival, two of the magazine's Pulitzer-winning journalists booked the debate:

Kathryn Schulz when Bannon was announced as a festival speaker: “I love working for @NewYorker, but I'm beyond appalled by this.”

Lawrence Wright after Bannon was disinvited: “Journalism is about hearing opposing views. I regret that this event is not taking place.”

In late 2017, The New York Times published a story about a suburban Dayton man

described as “the Nazi sympathizer next door.” The piece, with its descriptions of the man's Midwest manners and love of TV comedies, unleashed a torrent of criticism from readers and media writers who objected to anodyne treatment of a white nationalist. Some objected to covering him at all.

National editor Marc Lacey responded to the backlash with what seemed like genuine introspection, though to some critics that too was insufficient.

“We regret the degree to which the piece offended so many readers,” Lacey wrote. “We recognize that people can disagree on how best to tell a disagreeable story. What we think is indisputable, though, is the need to shed more light, not less, on the most extreme corners of American life and the people who inhabit them.”

He added: “That's what the story, however imperfectly, tried to do.”

Journalism in the age of Trump is uneasy, covering a presidency and a divided nation it didn't see coming. We disagree about who is worthy of our attention. We debate basic building blocks like “lie” and “racist.” We construct new ones (see “deplatform”).

We are unsure. We seem in search of a new journalistic rhetoric, and the possibilities are both promising and perilous.

A few days after Morris visited Nieman, I listened to an unlikely podcast, a conversation between Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel and Chicago Tribune theater critic Chris Jones. As the journalist and the politician talked about their city, the mayor mentioned a local critic whose views were pilloried by members of the theater community, some of whom advocated denying her access to reviewer tickets. Jones publicly defended her even as he disagreed with some of her views.

“This country needs to have conversation and the theater is a place of conversation,” Jones told the mayor. “I think ultimately it always has to be on the side of tolerance and it has to be on the side of many points of view. And it has to meet people where they are. Not everyone is in the same place in Chicago or in America for that matter. And I think the moment you start saying, ‘Well, we only want opinions that we agree with,’ it's a slippery slope.”

In what seemed especially relevant to the controversy that dogs Morris, Jones added: “It goes to the debate among progressives or liberals about whether this is a moment for conversation or whether it's a moment for resistance... Is this a time for conversation with everybody or do we say, no, we can't have that conversation?”

Morris still hopes that a distributor will acquire his film. If not, he may distribute it himself. “Have I done something wrong or unpardonable?” he asked me recently. “Isn't it the job of journalism to go out and explore these issues?”

A woman recently tweeted about “American Dharma,” “Is it okay to dread watching it?”

Morris responded, “How about—to dread not watching it.” ■

## “An Orgy of Mass Murder” In a new book, James M. Scott, NF ’07, investigates World War II atrocities in the Philippines

**I**N FEBRUARY 1945, during the Battle of Manila, Japanese troops committed one of the worst massacres of WWII, slaughtering tens of thousands of Filipino men, women, and children in a tragedy comparable perhaps only to the Rape of Nanking.

It is a story few people remember—but one I resurrect in my new book “Rampage: MacArthur, Yamashita and the Battle of Manila,” published by Norton in October.

For the past four years, I have been examining the horror that befell the capital of this former American colony when trapped Japanese soldiers and marines carried out what war crimes investigators later described as “an orgy of mass murder.” The crimes committed during those 29 days included locking thousands of civilians inside homes and social halls before setting them ablaze. Troops raped women and tossed infants in the air, skewering them on their bayonets. In one of the more gruesome accounts, Japanese marines forced blindfolded individuals to kneel, and decapitated them with swords. Two hundred men died this way.

So how do you report such a story three-quarters of a century later? I began in the National Archives in Washington, digitizing boxes of victim affidavits, often dictated from cots in field hospitals just weeks after U.S. troops liberated Manila. These now-yellow statements, recorded for potential use in war crimes trials, ran into the thousands. To

organize the vast amount of information—I digitized almost 4,000 pages of records a day—I created a database, logging the gruesome details of what each survivor endured.

I married months of archival work with field research in the Philippines, interviewing survivors and visiting many of the 27 major atrocity sites. I walked the hallways of the University of Santo Tomas, where American internees starved to death at the rate of three to four a day before Sherman tanks broke down the gates and liberated the nearly 3,700 captives. I peered into the dungeons of Fort Santiago, the infamous Japanese torture center where American troops found hundreds of dead civilians stacked several deep. I likewise sat in the chapel of De La Salle College, where Japanese marines had slaughtered priests and even children.

One of the most powerful experiences came via Battle of Manila survivor Jim Litton, who told me if I wanted to understand what it was like during that frightful time then I needed to retrace the path his family took

while fleeing the Japanese.

We did just that. Jim showed me where he lived as an 11-year-old boy when American troops finally rolled into Manila. We visited the spot on Florida Street where a Japanese landmine blew the legs off his family’s teenage housekeeper and nearly killed his mother. We entered the Philippine General Hospital, where, via the elevator shaft, Jim and his family, along with other civilians, had wriggled under the hospital’s crawlspace. There they had endured five days, scavenging water from toilet tanks before American troops killed the last of the Japanese marines.

Jim was right. Seeing the Battle of Manila through his eyes bridged the time gap and made it immediate and real. The barbarity committed during those few weeks in 1945 forever transformed the city and decimated generations of Filipino families, the ripples of which still echo through lives even today, 75 years later. “In a way we were all massacred,” one survivor testified. “Only, some of us were fortunate to have lived through it.” ■



American troops storm the bank of the Pasig River during the Battle of Manila in 1945

## The five-hour work day? She’s got it covered Financial Times columnist Pilita Clark, NF ’97, takes on the modern workplace

**D**id you know it sometimes helps to work when slightly drunk? What about the companies asking their staff to work five-hour days on the same pay? Or the idea that office smokers are the original smart networkers?

I knew about precisely none of this until last year, when I stopped being the Financial Times’

environment correspondent and started writing a weekly column on modern corporate life.

It was a slightly odd transition. After six years on the environment beat, I had just about mastered the intricacies of the Paris agreement and the workings of a solar panel.

Before that, I had reported on airlines and politics, been a foreign correspondent and an editor,

but I had never been a full-time columnist and I had barely written a word about working life.

I have always been interested in the foibles and frustrations of working life though and suddenly, it was my job to write about them. Every week. Brilliantly.

Judging by readers’ comments, the column is a work in progress. “Right on!” they said when I wrote

## “I can’t imagine our community without the Advocate”

Editor and publisher Chris Cobler, NF ’06, prioritizes holding local officials accountable while pushing to keep 172-year-old paper on sound financial footing

**O**UR FAMILY-OWNED newspaper, the Victoria (Texas) Advocate, is an exception to the corporate media strategy of squeezing out every last cent of the brand until it has no value left. The owners’ roots in Victoria run three generations deep, and the local ownership of the newspaper goes back even farther—172 years.

Against this backdrop, it’s not as surprising that an editor would take on the role of publisher, too, which I did this summer. In my new dual role, I try to bring the right mix of sensibilities to the challenging financial times facing newspapers. I am learning to look even harder for new revenue streams while still honoring the integrity of an independent newsroom. As has happened with every U.S. newspaper, our print circulation has declined, but our readership remains high as ever through digital delivery.

I lean on the principles promoted in Penelope Muse Abernathy’s “Saving Community Journalism”—especially the need to succeed on multiple platforms. This is why the Advocate’s reach remains dominant in our region: Along with our daily print circulation, we have 3 million monthly page views at on our website and almost 50,000 Facebook followers in a city of 65,000 people.

As editor and publisher, I have no qualms about telling a local furniture store owner why he needs to be advertising on all three



Income inequality worsened by Hurricane Harvey, which destroyed this man’s Rockport, Texas home, was the topic of the Advocate’s “Hidden in Plain Sight” series

platforms to get the maximum reach for his ad dollars while at the same time letting him know we’re going to report fairly the other side of his beef with the city’s code enforcement.

Even more important is how deep the newspaper’s ties to the community run. Our owners have served on just about every board and given in countless ways to the community. Victorians know their local newspaper is not some carpetbagger sending profits to headquarters out of state.

For them and everyone at the Advocate, I feel a tremendous obligation to find a path to a more stable financial future. We have to look for creative ways to fund our journalism, which is why we’re part of Report for America, a nonprofit that—along with an anonymous community member—pays for two-thirds of reporter Ciara McCarthy’s salary. In addition, we must get a stable source of revenue from our subscribers, which is why we recently took the long-overdue step of adding a metered paywall to our website. As always, we must listen intently to our community, which is why we’ve been broadcasting live our news meetings for the

past 10 years, and be true to our core values, which is why our newspaper ethics board meets monthly. For community newspapers like the Advocate, reader engagement is not a new industry buzzword—it’s how we’ve long operated. That’s why readers routinely respond with comments to our livestream news meetings and offer story tips via Facebook or at the grocery store.

McCarthy’s work in our newsroom allowed us to produce “Hidden in Plain Sight,” an in-depth look at income inequality worsened by Hurricane Harvey. Our commitment to representing the public compelled us to sue the nearby Calhoun Port Authority for violating the Texas Open Meetings Act by hiring disgraced congressman Blake Farenthold with no public notice. Our emphasis on investigative reporting led reporter Jessica Priest to uncover the Calhoun board’s serious conflicts of interest that led to Farenthold’s hiring as a lobbyist.

I can’t imagine our community without its Advocate. As editor and publisher, it’s my job to be sure our readers and advertisers feel the same way. ■

about the lost art of drinking on the job, a practice U.S. researchers think dulls one’s focus enough to boost creativity. “Bravo,” said one, when I reported on the companies switching to five-hour days to boost productivity. “Sad to see you have to write such trivia,” said another when I hit on the idea that the old smoking room was one of the cheapest, most effective ways

to spur office communication.

It has become clear why some columnists say it’s best to ignore all reader comments. Yet I am mostly grateful for mine, especially those that alert me to something I’d never considered before or, better yet, make me smile.

The field of workplace reporting has grown more crowded since I stumbled into it.

News sites such as Quartz have set up entire sections devoted to management, leadership, and productivity. Podcasts on these topics have bloomed around the world. Every other day seems to bring a new book on the world of work in my mailbag, often bearing disturbing news. Technological disruption, the gig economy, job-killing robots, and a slew of other

woes feed into a spreading sense of workplace insecurity.

As someone who has had a career in the newspaper industry, job insecurity is hardly unfamiliar.

Yet the more I write about the modern workplace, the more I realize that my own, fortunate position as a full-time employee at a relatively prosperous and humane company sets me apart. ■

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION  
OPPOSITE: OLIVIA VANNI/THE VICTORIA ADVOCATE

WHERE  
DOES  
JOURNALISM  
END AND  
ACTIVISM  
BEGIN?

This polarized political moment raises fresh questions in newsrooms about the line between reporting and advocacy

BY MICHAEL BLANDING  
ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN RITTER

JOURNAL  
ACTIV



# THE DAY AFTER

THE DAY AFTER the March for Our Lives last spring, Rebecca Schneid, co-editor of the high school newspaper at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, where a shooter killed 17 people in February 2018, appeared on CNN. “I see a lot of Parkland students becoming activists, but you all were there as journalists,” host Brian Stelter observed about Schneid and other students of the school paper, *The Eagle Eye*, who were covering the protest. The march drew more than 200,000 people to advocate for gun control less than six weeks after the school shooting. “Do you see a difference right now between journalism and activism in what you are doing?”

Wearing two bright pins, one reading “Enough is Enough,” next to her body mic, Schneid barely missed a beat. “I think that for me, the purpose of journalism is to raise the voices of people who maybe don’t have a voice,” she said. “And so I think that in its own right, journalism is a form of activism.”

She went on to qualify her statement, saying, “There is a distinction for me, as a journalist, and also someone who wants to

demand change, but I think the partnership of the two is the only reason that we are able to make change.”

As soon as CNN tweeted the first part of her quote, Twitter erupted. Comment after comment accused Schneid of failing to understand the difference between journalism and propaganda.

“Journalism is covering a story and giving us the facts, then allowing us, the reader or viewer, to make up our mind,” read a typical response. Others were harsher, including some piling on Stelter for not challenging the statement—seeing it as evidence of the network’s liberal bias.

As Danielle Tcholakian, who teaches journalism at the New School, noted in *Longreads*, Schneid’s critics included some professional journalists, such as the *National Journal*’s Josh Kraushaar, who blamed journalism education for not doing enough to inculcate objectivity in the next generation. “It’s this mentality that’s killing trust in our profession,” Kraushaar wrote.

Other reporters, however, defended Schneid, with the *Los Angeles Times*’s Matt

Pearce pointing out that “Choosing what you want people to know is a form of activism, even if it’s not the march-and-protest kind.” *Washington Post* national reporter Wesley Lowery agreed, saying, “Any good journalist is an activist for truth, in favor of transparency, on the behalf of accountability.”

Journalism has long been committed to unbiased reporting and to shining a light on injustices in society. The tension between those two mandates has become more apparent in the current polarized political moment, when groups such as Black Lives Matter and the Parkland students clamor against the status quo, and the #MeToo movement has brought activism into the newsroom itself—causing some journalists to question where journalism ends and activism begins.

Two issues stand out: the feeling in many newsrooms that there are not two sides to some issues—for example, LGBT rights or white supremacy—and the ongoing debate about whether reporters can or should express political views outside the newsroom, such as on social media, and take part in marches or other forms of political demonstration.

When the president says there are “very fine people” on both sides of a white nationalist rally, is it objectivity or activism to call that racist?

When hundreds of thousands of women take to the National Mall in a march for female rights and empowerment, does it cross a line for a journalist to stand with them?

When the rights of transgender people are under attack, is it wrong for a transgender journalist to speak up for equality?

The debate in some cases breaks down along generational lines, with older journalists likely to maintain the separation between news and opinion while younger journalists see less distinction between their personal and public personas.

Alfredo Carbajal, president of the American Society of News Editors (ASNE) and managing editor of Dallas-based *Al Día*, says being a journalist comes with certain sacrifices: “We are giving up the prerogatives most citizens have to express our point of

view. I cannot maintain credibility if I make a distinction between this is what I see as a person and this is what I see as a journalist.”

For some younger journalists, however, their identity is intimately wrapped up with their writing. “I think as the journalism industry crumbles, this may be where the generational divide comes in,” says Peter Moskowitz, a freelance writer for outlets such as news and opinion site *Splinter*, *The Outline*, and *Vice*. Moskowitz covered the Charlottesville white supremacy rally for *Splinter* and wrote a first-person piece for *The Outline* about the rally, including seeing the car that drove into the crowd, killing counterprotester Heather Heyer.

“I would consider writing a part of my activism,” Moskowitz says. “There is no way to separate these things. If you are writing for mainstream news, you are still advocating for something, you just are not stating what you are advocating for.”

As newsrooms have become—haltingly—more diverse, a new layer has been added to the debate. “The view from nowhere in the classical tradition was the white, male privileged point of view,” says Indira Lakshmanan, executive editor of the Pulitzer Center and former ethics chair at the Poynter Institute. In revising their ethical standards, Lakshmanan says, publications have been giving up the idea of objectivity in favor of other words like “impartiality” or “accuracy” to better reflect the idea that journalists always approach issues with a point of view based on their backgrounds and experience.

Even publications that cover specific issues, often funded through philanthropy, strive to find a balance between advocacy and objectivity. Former *New York Times* editor Bill Keller is now editor of *The Marshall Project*, a nonprofit that draws attention to problems in the U.S. criminal justice system. Keller says he maintains the same standards as he did at the *Times* when it comes to journalists expressing personal views. He sees the project’s mission as providing information about the system—even ways in which the system is broken—rather than advocating

AS JOURNALISM IS OVERLAPPING WITH ACTIVISM IN SOME WAYS, SOME ACTIVISTS ARE ALSO VENTURING INTO JOURNALISM



Under the direction of executive editor Samhita Mukhopadhyay, right, *Teen Vogue* has become a more consciously activist publication

for particular ways to fix it. “We supply credible information anyone can cite in pursuit of their own aims,” Keller says. “But we don’t prescribe, we don’t endorse, we want to provide people with the information to make up their own mind.”

Even as journalism is overlapping with activism in some ways, some activists are also venturing into journalism. As a 2018 story in *Columbia Journalism Review* illustrates, the democratization of the web has caused activist organizations, including the ACLU, Human Rights Watch, and Greenpeace, to post original content that goes beyond mere press releases. The team of reporters at the ACLU, for example, publishes up to 20 stories a week on its site; one 2018 story about concerns with Amazon’s partnership with government around its facial recognition software featured in-depth reporting, including public records requests to expose the issue. It simultaneously released information to *The New York Times* and other outlets, which wrote stories at the same time.

Traditionally, the division between journalism and activism has been motivated in part by a fear of being perceived as biased. Unspoken in that concern is *who* will perceive that bias. For at least the past three decades,

voices on the right have been accusing the mainstream media of liberal bias and using those allegations to discredit its reporting.

In fact, most journalists do tilt left. Numerous studies have found that journalists are more likely to call themselves liberal than conservative, donate to Democratic candidates, and identify as Democrats rather than Republicans, though over half of journalists in a 2013 study identified as Independents. Does that mean that they are not able to be objective in their reporting?

Not necessarily, according to a 2017 report from the Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society at Harvard. In fact, the report found that a culture of accountability exists on the left and center and a culture of unchecked bias exists on the far right.

In analyzing news stories shared on Facebook and Twitter over the past three years, the Berkman Klein Center found that media were divided into two distinct ecosystems, according to center co-director Yochai Benkler. One group clustered politically from slightly right of center to moderately left of center. The same readers liked and retweeted stories from all of these publications, and the publications themselves often linked to each other and commented on each other’s stories.

Appearing on CNN in March 2018, Rebecca Schneid, co-editor in chief of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School newspaper, said she considers journalism a form of activism



MATT MCCLAIN/THE WASHINGTON POST VIA GETTY IMAGES  
OPPOSITE: VIVIAN KILLILEA/GETTY IMAGES FOR BUMBLE

**“I DON’T THINK IT’S IMMORAL TO MARCH IN A PROTEST;  
I THINK IT COULD IMPACT THE WAY YOU WORK”  
—BUZZFEED EDITOR BEN SMITH**

“What was surprising was the extent to which, all the way from The Wall Street Journal, Forbes, and The Hill to Daily Kos and Mother Jones, they were all linked to each other,” says Benkler. “They are all operating in a media ecosystem where media outlets check each other and call each other’s errors out,” which Benkler calls a “reality-check dynamic.”

The other ecosystem spans politically from moderate to far right—from Fox News to Infowars, with Breitbart in between. “That network is much more insular from the rest of journalism, and there is no actual equivalent on the left to that,” says Benkler, a co-author of “Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics” which was published by Oxford University Press in September.

That ecosystem, unchecked by the rest of the media landscape, operates in a “propaganda feedback loop,” Benkler and his colleagues found. “As long as the story is consistent with a partisan identity, it is replicated and communicated,” Benkler says. “Its truth or falsehood is not an issue.” That creates a double standard, he says, where unverified stories on the left quickly wilt and disappear, while those on the right are amplified and repeated.

According to this analysis, media outlets on the far right can be considered activist by promoting viewpoints divorced from fact. Those on the center-left, meanwhile, can engage in false equivalencies as a way to avoid being labeled “activist” by the right.

Benkler’s advice to those journalists: Forget about trying to persuade those in the right-wing ecosystem by presenting both sides of issues when one side is demonstrably false. “Professional journalism needs to shift away from the way in which it performs objectivity. The critical move needs to be from objectivity as neutrality to objectivity as truth-seeking. That’s how you avoid false equivalencies. In a propaganda-rich system, to be neutral is to be complicit.”

Perhaps no publication represents the rejection of the on-the-one-hand/on-the-other-hand approach better than Teen Vogue,

which over the past three years has become a more consciously activist publication, embracing causes including Standing Rock, Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, and the March for Our Lives.

“We show our point of view by the editorial choices we make, by the subjects we cover,” says executive editor Samhita Mukhopadhyay. “It’s not just Teen Vogue. I think there are a lot of platforms that cater to a younger audience, and many of them have shifted to a more social-justice focused tone.”

Teen Vogue’s political coverage has included stories on protests in dozens of cities against the Trump administration’s policy of separating children from immigrant parents at the border. Another article profiled teens in Flint, Michigan, who have grown up without clean water in their homes since the lead crisis was discovered in 2014. Above all, the magazine has covered young gun-control activists, including a story focused on participants in a die-in at congressional offices, a profile of a teen running for her local school board after being threatened with suspension for taking part in gun-control protests, and ongoing coverage of the latest efforts of the teen activists from Parkland. Mukhopadhyay observes a change in the way millennials and Generation Z (“zillennials”) conceive of their role as journalists. “When I started 10 years ago, I never would have dreamed of allowing a reporter to go to a protest, but it’s just different now,” she says. “I feel like we are facing a movement right now like in the 1960s when black journalists were asked to cover the civil rights movement. I have a young, outspoken staff, and that’s what makes our work so impactful.”

In covering social movements, Mukhopadhyay urges her reporters to refrain from participating in protests while they are covering them, but she doesn’t have any hard-and-fast rules about it. “I am going to expect a story, and it’s very hard to get a story if you are there protesting,” she says. “If they want to protest on their own time, I will not decide whether they should or should not do that.”

In contrast, NPR’s current guidelines on marches, for example, emphasize that there “is real journalistic value in being an observer at public events such as a march or rally, even without a reporting assignment.” But it goes on to acknowledge that “waving a picket sign or joining along in a cheer would be inappropriate.”

Teen Vogue wellness features editor Vera Papisova, who helped cover the March for Our Lives protest, sees the magazine’s job as above all giving a voice to young people who are passionate about issues. “Telling the story responsibly means doing my research

MELISSA RENWICK/TORONTO STAR VIA GETTY IMAGES

and making space for the people I am writing about to speak for themselves, while also providing an informed context for their voices and experiences,” she says.

Since 2017, Teen Vogue has taken that attitude outside of the newsroom, too, with a Teen Vogue Summit focusing on politics and activism. Last year’s conference, held in June in New York, featured Parkland activist Emma González and other teens advocating for gun control as well as transgender Virginia lawmaker Danica Roem, rapper Common, and climate activist and former vice president Al Gore. Despite the roster

**Toronto Star columnist Desmond Cole addresses a crowd at a Black Lives Matter protest in Toronto in July 2015. Cole left the paper in 2017 after being reprimanded for his activism**

of progressive speakers, Mukhopadhyay insists the goal is not to promote any party or political viewpoint, but just to get teens to be active politically.

The line between information and advocacy can get more complicated, however, when publications take a stance on specific issues.

In 2015, BuzzFeed published new ethics guidelines stating, “We firmly believe that for a number of issues, including civil rights, women’s rights, anti-racism, and LGBT

equality, there are not two sides.” For editor Ben Smith, that’s an uncontroversial statement: “It’s hard to find a news organization where they say there are two sides to racial segregation. I don’t think the question of whether LGBT citizens have equal rights is a debatable point.”

There is a line, though, between expressing your point of view and being partisan, says Smith. The publication enforces a policy prohibiting staffers from taking part in political rallies or posting partisan political



**“AS A MARGINALIZED WRITER OF COLOR,  
I CAN’T AFFORD TO BE CALLED AN ACTIVIST”  
—FREELANCE JOURNALIST JENNI MONET**

views on social media. “This isn’t an exact science,” Smith says, “but if my clever tweet makes it harder for my colleague to cover a business because it seems like I am sneering at them, I shouldn’t do it.” That stance is as much a tactical decision as it is a moral judgment for Smith, who says, “I don’t think it’s immoral to march in a protest; I think it could impact the way you work.”

Exactly where that line is can be difficult to discern.

In 2016, BuzzFeed ran into controversy when it called out the hosts of an HGTV home improvement show for their membership in an anti-gay church. Many conservatives felt BuzzFeed crossed a line, with Christians arguing that people who oppose same-sex marriage and LGBT rights are persecuted by the media. A Lutheran pastor published a piece in *The Federalist* under the headline, “BuzzFeed Wants To Destroy Chip And Joanna Gaines For Being Christian And Wildly Popular.”

A prohibition against expressing political opinions doesn’t always sit well with journalists who feel their rights and identity are under threat. In the wake of Trump’s inauguration in 2017, then-“Marketplace” reporter Lewis Wallace took to his personal blog with a post called “Objectivity is dead, and I am fine with it.” “The media has finally picked up trans stories, but the nature of the debate is over whether or not we should be allowed to live and participate in society, use public facilities and expect not to be harassed, fired, or even killed,” he wrote. “Obviously, I can’t be neutral or centrist in a debate over my own humanity.”

In response, American Public Media (APM), the parent company of “Marketplace,” fired Wallace, saying his post conflicted with its policy that requires that reporters “keep their political views private” to avoid “creating the perception of political bias.” In a statement at the time expanding on the company’s reasoning, Deborah Clark, senior vice president and general manager of “Marketplace,” said, “When I talk about not being part of the ‘view from nowhere,’ that doesn’t mean we do advocacy or biased

journalism. We do independent, objective reporting that brings forward a balanced point of view on the news we cover.”

Wallace says it was actually his own superiors at APM who had encouraged him to be more personal and “voicely” in his posts on social media, and others have pointed out they didn’t seem to have a problem with host Kai Ryssdal posting tweets openly critical of Trump on his personal Twitter feed. “I loved my job,” says Wallace, who now works as state news editor at Southern politics and culture magazine *Scalawag*. “I think ‘Marketplace’ missed an opportunity to be leaders in a nuanced conversation. I am always coming into a situation where people don’t perceive me as ‘neutral,’ in much the same way there is not a ‘neutral’ interaction for a person of color to cover a white supremacist rally.”

Scalawag doesn’t prohibit journalists from expressing personal views about issues or covering issues that personally affect them, Wallace says. In any case, he doesn’t see that as activism in the same way that organizing a community around an issue would be: “There is such a thing as conflict of interest, and I am fairly vigilant about that. We fact-check and make sure that the story considers as many points of view as possible. But we certainly don’t say, ‘You have a connection to this issue, so you can’t cover it.’”

In a 2018 story about transgender people helping one another access healthcare, Wallace profiles activists in Tennessee and Kentucky who run nonprofit hotlines connecting trans people with trans-friendly doctors and medical clinics. The story presents a positive view of the activists and doesn’t hold back on criticizing the “hostile legislative and cultural environment” that has led to discrimination against transgender people seeking medical care. Nor does it include the point of view of a doctor who might decline to serve a transgender person on religious grounds.

As for participating in protests of anti-trans “bathroom bills,” Wallace says, “I wouldn’t say a journalist could never cover the anti-trans bathroom bill and also protest

the anti-trans bathroom bill, but for me, I want to focus on getting the story right—and trying to simultaneously participate can be a distraction.”

Wallace is currently writing a book about the history of objectivity in journalism for the University of Chicago Press, tracing its roots back to the creation of journalism schools and ethical codes in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. At that time, some Americans were facing new anxieties about the influx of immigrants into cities and the right of women to vote. “There was a lot more visibility to a whole lot of diverse populations,” says Wallace, who sees a connection between these two phenomena, not only codifying what it means to be objective but also what kind of person is able to be objective; namely, those who reflected a white, male worldview. “No sooner had objectivity come fully into being as a framework than it was used to keep out journalists whose interests were different than the owners of the paper.”

Wallace’s firing is not an isolated incident. In the spring of 2017, the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga fired an openly transgender reporter at the university-owned NPR affiliate WUTC. The reporter had been covering an anti-trans bathroom bill in Tennessee. The firing happened after lawmakers threatened to cut funding from the station, complaining that she had not identified herself as a reporter. The corporate offices of NPR defended the reporter, who had been wearing a press pass and carrying bulky recording equipment, chastising the university for caving to political pressure. The university subsequently agreed to pay the reporter \$50,000 to settle a lawsuit she had filed related to her firing.

Also in 2017, Toronto Star columnist Desmond Cole, who covered issues of police harassment of African-Americans, left the paper after being reprimanded for staging a protest at a police board hearing.

For several years, Cole had opposed “carding,” in which police randomly stop black people on the street to demand their IDs and interrogate them without probable cause. In 2015, Cole had written an article

for Toronto Life claiming he’d been carded more than 50 times on the streets of the city. The Star, which hired Cole for his opinions on racial issues, wasn’t always comfortable with his advocacy in print. According to Cole, in 2016, the paper’s publisher John Honderich suggested he was writing about racial issues too often and that he diversify his subject matter. Honderich denies that, saying only that he suggested Cole not write so much about carding.

In April 2017, at a police board meeting, Cole lifted his hand in a black power salute and refused to leave the podium until the police agreed to destroy the information they’d gathered through carding. In response, Cole says the paper privately admonished him, saying he couldn’t be both an activist and a columnist.

As the Star’s public editor Kathy English explained in an article, the paper didn’t have any problem with an opinion columnist taking public stands on issues. “It was only when Cole became the story ... that he took his activism to a new level that became of concern.” She went on to say that the paper had spent years reporting the carding story, in fact, spending “large sums of money” on public records requests that showed black people were three times as likely to be stopped by Toronto police as white people—but that Cole’s protest at the board hearing called into question the paper’s ability to cover the issue fairly.

Cole, who declined to be interviewed for this article, decided to leave the paper rather than limit his activism, writing on his blog that “[i]f I must choose between a newspaper column and the actions I must take to liberate myself and my community, I choose activism in the service of Black liberation.” Cole has taken his fight against carding national with campaigns against the carding of indigenous groups in Alberta, while continuing to promote his views as host of a talk radio show and even flirting with running for mayor of Toronto.

The incident sparked intense debate within Toronto’s journalist community, with some reporters supporting the paper’s



Jenni Monet, pictured on the outskirts of the Dakota Access Pipeline opposition camp at the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in February 2017, was arrested while covering the protests

decision and others decrying a double-standard, in which the Star has continued to publish outspoken activists, such as women’s rights campaigner Michele Landsberg and anti-corporate globalization activist Naomi Klein.

Landsberg herself criticized the paper’s handling of the issue, saying that for 25 years as a columnist the newspaper had supported her activism on feminism and poverty issues, including printing a petition to prevent the closure of a child care center and filming a commercial of her presenting the signed petitions to the Canadian premier. “Is race less vital than poverty or sex discrimination?” she wrote in the Toronto alternative weekly *NOW Magazine*. “People of color who are (or were) loyal to the Star will not ignore the fact that one of their own has effectively been shown the door for his activism on their behalf.”

The question of where to draw the line between journalism and activism isn’t only an issue on the left. In 2017, the Sarasota Herald-Tribune appointed one of its opinion columnists, Lee Williams, as topics editor of the newspaper, a position responsible for assigning breaking news stories as well as editing columnists. In addition to his role as a columnist at the paper, Williams is a proponent of gun rights, running a blog for the paper called “The Gun Writer” and a podcast called “Think, Aim, Fire.” On his blog he’s sympathetically covered gun rights rallies and criticized companies like Dick’s Sporting Goods, which ended sales of assault-style weapons and raised the age for gun buyers after the Parkland shootings.

In a podcast episode two weeks after the school shooting, Williams and a cohost derided gun control measures and advocated for arming teachers to make schools safer.

Inside the Sarasota Herald-Tribune newsroom, reactions were mixed. One columnist quit soon after Williams’ appointment, but executive editor Matthew Sauer defended the appointment to Poynter, which first wrote about Williams in April, saying, “We encourage people to be passionate about certain topics and to pursue it ... Do I worry about it coloring his opinion of a certain topic? No. He is a professional.” Indeed, the paper’s coverage of guns doesn’t showcase any obvious bias. Breaking stories have included coverage of the Santa Fe, Texas school shooting in May, continuing calls from Parkland students for more gun control, and efforts from Democrats and Republicans in the Florida legislature to pass new legislation on school safety.

In 1989, Linda Greenhouse, then a reporter for *The New York Times*, was criticized for taking part in a pro-abortion rights march while she was covering the Supreme Court for the paper. In her 2017 book “Just a Journalist: On the Press, Life, and the Spaces Between,” Greenhouse calls herself an “accidental activist,” making a distinction between attending an event as an activist and as an engaged citizen. “The abortion march was an action in which half a million people took part,” Greenhouse says. “Would I have marched under a banner that said, ‘New York Times Reporters for Choice’? No, I would not. I simply went as a person.”

While the case has since become a classic

## THE LINES BETWEEN ACCURACY AND ACTIVISM, AND ADVOCACY AND ADVERSARY, MAY SHIFT DEPENDING ON WHICH SIDE OF THE POLITICAL DIVIDE YOU ARE STANDING

study in conflict of interest, Greenhouse says she actually went with the full knowledge of her colleagues at the time. Her participation quickly was made into an issue, with the Times eventually publishing a story saying that Greenhouse had violated its conflict-of-interest policy. The controversy flared up again in 2006 after Greenhouse made a speech at the Radcliffe Institute criticizing then-President George W. Bush's policies on reproductive rights. At that event, critics again raised her participation in the march, now more than 25 years later, as something that prevented her from being objective. "It was a retrospective sanctimony that descended on mainstream journalism, much to my surprise," Greenhouse says, adding that it's ironic that up until that time, the quality of her work hadn't been questioned. "Whatever happened to judging reporters by the quality and fairness of their work, rather than what's in their hearts and minds?" she asks. "If we are not professional enough to keep our opinions out of the news product, maybe we shouldn't be making a news product."

More recently, journalists fretted about newsroom edicts forbidding them from taking part in the Women's March on Washington, which took place the day after Trump's inauguration in January 2017. Those strictures didn't sit well with many female journalists, who discussed on private Facebook groups their desire to take part in the event, says Shaya Tayefe Mohajer, a former reporter for the Associated Press who now teaches journalism at the University of Southern California.

"We have to admit that women have never experienced full equality in America or any society," says Mohajer, who wrote an article for *Columbia Journalism Review* titled, "Why journalists should be able to join the Women's March." The way of the world in journalism is very male and very white, she says, and that limits the perspective of people who may have never had to protest for their rights.

While Mohajer says she followed the rules on not protesting while at the AP, she pointed out in her CJR piece the contradictions

inherent for female journalists and journalists of color in the profession. "We are told to speak truth to power, to reveal inequality, to empower the disadvantaged and the poor," she wrote. "But diverse employees are also told to stay silent when they feel their own rights and those of other marginalized communities are threatened."

She went on to argue that silencing may be one reason that journalism has not gotten more diverse despite decades of efforts. "There is a barrier to entry in journalism, particularly for the younger generation, which is not interested in hiding identity the way we were told to," she says. "It is not honest to pretend we are not what we are."

Mohajer attended the Women's March, carrying a sign urging women around the world to unite. As an Iranian-American, she also attended protests at Los Angeles International Airport in response to the Trump administration's travel ban on citizens from predominantly Muslim countries. "I don't speak to media when I go," she

**Marches demanding sensible gun control laws, including this one in D.C., took place nationwide after the mass shooting at Florida's Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in 2018**



explains. "I don't carry political signs or signs for any particular group. But I don't see a reason to stop advocating for equality."

And just because a journalist strongly identifies with a marginalized group, that doesn't mean she is necessarily drawn to protesting for their rights. Freelance journalist Jenni Monet, who is Laguna Pueblo, started covering the protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) at the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation around the time that it first attracted wide media coverage. She kept herself at a remove from the activists who were staying at the camp, sleeping in motels or in her car.

For Monet's first piece for *Yes! Magazine*, "Climate Justice Meets Racism," she interviewed white, conservative North Dakotans about their discomfort with "outsiders" coming in to stir up unrest. She also examined how the pipeline's course was changed from its original path near Bismarck to go through Standing Rock and detailed bigoted posts on Facebook by local officials.

"If you are going to use the word racism, you better be prepared on every corner to tell why this is racism," Monet says. "As a marginalized writer of color, I can't afford to be called an activist."

Writers from marginalized groups must walk a fine line, in part due to the media's own desire for sensationalistic stories about conflict and injustice, she says, rather than more nuanced takes on Indian Country. Mainstream media loves headlines that fire up readers by foregrounding injustice, Monet says, "so indigenous writers are forced to work within those confines," which often means getting typecast as an advocacy journalist. Monet has found less interest in more complex stories about politics both inside and outside the tribe. In later stories for *Reveal* at the Center for Investigative Reporting and *Yes!*, for example, Monet considered how the tribes were caught in a tug of war between state and federal authorities for control of the reservation, subtly criticized outside protesters coming in who exoticized the Native American camp, and covered disagreements among tribal leaders about whether continuing to protest the pipeline was best for the reservation.

Her position as a Native American writer gives her insight into debates within the community that an outside writer might miss, says Monet, allowing her to understand distinctions within the community rather than viewing it as monolithic in its views. "Yet, often the condescending assumption is that stories that come from Native writers like myself have an inability to be objective," she says.

When activists at Standing Rock were arrested en masse, Monet was arrested with them. As a journalist who had been regularly covering press conferences, she expected to be released by the time she got to jail; instead, she says she was detained for 30 hours, strip searched, and denied the right to make a phone call. Despite repeatedly telling jail officials she was a member of the press, she was subjected to racial slurs by the jail captain, who called the women "savages." She wrote about that experience, too, providing

firsthand evidence of the kind of racism to which Native protesters were subjected.

Experiencing close-up what activists go through can lead to richer, more sympathetic coverage, even for journalists who are not members of marginalized groups. But it can also lead to questions about maintaining proper distance to objectively cover events.

That's what happened in the Black Lives Matter protests in Ferguson in 2014, according to Stephen Barnard, a professor of sociology at St. Lawrence University. Barnard analyzed the use of Twitter by activists and journalists during the events. In the chaos of the protests, which sometimes turned violent, lines between journalists and activists broke down, says Barnard, with hybrid citizen journalists—or "journo-activists," as he calls them—often breaking news on social media and professional journalists playing catch-up.

Even more interesting was how the coverage by journalists embedded with protesters—including the Post's Wesley Lowery, the LA Times's Matt Pearce, and HuffPo's Ryan J. Reilly—diverged from those at more of a remove. As police pushed to control the crowd with tear gas and rubber bullets, tweets by embedded journalists became more emotional and sympathetic in tone.

"As journalists started to be on the ground with activists and share these visceral experiences, they were tweeting in many ways not that differently than the way activists were tweeting," says Barnard. In the heat of the protests, one journalist wrote, "Police shooting tear gas directly at journalists now. Flashing lights so cameras can't record. #Ferguson #MikeBrown." The next day, a journalist shared a statement of solidarity with activists and implicit criticism of police, saying, "It wasn't all bad tonight. I made friends with at least a handful of folks who didn't threaten me with batons and tear gas. #Ferguson."

That doesn't mean these reporters were not reporting the facts, but they were exposed to different facts than the journalists on the other side of the police line who were getting their news from the officials at press conferences. They could see "the facts of

militarization of our police force and the way those forces were deployed against largely peaceful protesters," Barnard says. "The fact that journalists were tear-gassed, detained, and limited in doing their jobs was a bit of a trigger for them, that this is crossing a line and we won't stand for it."

Barnard's "Citizens at the Gates: Twitter, Networked Publics, and the Transformation of American Journalism," published in 2018 by Palgrave Macmillan, extends the analysis to journalists' coverage of Donald Trump after the election. On the whole, Barnard found journalists' responses to be restrained compared to those from the general public. Journalists were not merely reporting the facts of Trump's statements, but adding commentary, context, and fact-checking, sometimes with a forceful edge—for example, saying, "This is ridiculously out of context," or "This shows how Trump simply does not understand governing." "They were using [Twitter] to correct the record," says Barnard, even if in an entertaining and engaging way.

To those on the other side of the political divide, those same tweets could be seen as partisan attacks. "It blurs the line between what is advocacy or activism, and what is traditional adversarial journalism," says Barnard.

The lines between accuracy and activism, and advocate and adversary, may shift depending on which side of the political divide, or which side of the police line, you are standing. But journalism "does require some skill in recognizing other people's points of view and being able to hear someone's story," says Teen Vogue's Mukhopadhyay. That openness extends to hearing the story of the police when writing about a protest, or hearing the story of an accused rapist when reporting on sexual assault, something most activists would never trouble themselves with.

"What I want to know more than anything is if you are curious," says Mukhopadhyay. "We all know none of these stories are black-and-white. Despite what your opinion is, if you are ruled by your opinion, that is not real reporting." ■

Women's sports in the U.S. receive only 4 percent of sports media coverage. How—and why—to change that

BY SHIRA SPRINGER



# #TIREDOFTHEBIAS

# O

ON MAY 18, 2018, with the NBA and NHL playoffs making headlines across the country, three of the four stories on the front page of the Minneapolis Star Tribune sports section focused on women's sports, including the WNBA's Minnesota Lynx. On September 7, with the NFL starting up, college football rumbling along, and Major League Baseball nearing the playoffs, The Seattle Times wrapped its sports section in a poster of the Seattle Storm's biggest stars, 11-time WNBA All-Star Sue Bird and 2018 WNBA MVP Breanna Stewart. Inside, there were two-plus pages devoted to the women's basketball team and its upcoming WNBA Finals matchup against the Washington Mystics.

If these sections were your introduction to America's obsession with sports, you might have thought women's sports generated more interest than men's sports. The reality is far different.

In July, NBA summer league games got far more mainstream media coverage than WNBA regular season games. Every day, men's sports stories dominate the 10 most popular sports websites. The bigger picture: women's sports in the U.S. receive only 4 percent of sports media coverage, according to the Tucker Center for Research on Girls & Women in Sport at the University of Minnesota. In a study of televised sports news, ongoing since 1989, three LA-based stations dedicated, on average, 3.2 percent of their sports coverage to women's sports, according to the 2014 results, the latest available.

"We had days where we were collecting data on local news broadcasts or on ESPN's 'SportsCenter' and there would literally be no coverage of women's sports," says Purdue University associate professor Cheryl Cooky, a co-author of the television study. "But the local network would spend 55 seconds out of their three minutes of sports content talking about a stray dog that had wandered into the Milwaukee Brewers stadium. And it's like, 'The women's NCAA basketball tournament is going on and you can't talk about the tournament but you can find time to talk about a stray dog going into a stadium?' There's a lot of missed opportunities with respect to helping build audiences for women's sport."

There are also signs of change, thanks in part to vocal critics, social media, and a rash of sports media startups eager to build bigger audiences. "There are people in women's sports who are demanding better coverage," says former Sports Illustrated sports media reporter Richard Deitsch, who now writes for The Athletic. "Lynx coach and general manager Cheryl Reeve is the ultimate example. She's basically called out media people on Twitter. And I think her actions have worked."

**Michelle Carter, who wrote a personal essay for espnW on the lessons learned from shot putting, competes at the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where she won gold**

**PREVIOUS SPREAD: Sue Bird of the Seattle Storm goes for the basket in a July 2018 game against the Phoenix Mercury in Phoenix, Arizona**

One of her targets on social media: The Athletic. On Twitter, she asked "Why would a subscriber-based sports medium that claims 'full access to all sports' limit its earnings potential by not covering women's sports?? The Athletic does just that ... and it's bad business. #tiredofthebias." This season, the website assigned two writers to almost every Lynx game and practice. While regular Lynx coverage was something the website said it always planned to do, Reeve's outspokenness drew wider attention to the issue and undoubtedly prompted faster action.

This fall, The Athletic held organizational meetings to discuss its approach to content in 2019 and beyond. So, how does women's sports coverage fit into The Athletic's plans for growth? Paul Fichtenbaum, chief content officer for The Athletic, says, "We're right in the middle of it so I'm not comfortable making projections. But we're having a thoughtful discussion internally on the best approaches. We want to cover women's sports. It is on the agenda and we're serious about it."

But even when women's sports do get covered, a number of studies have found, the focus is often on femininity and attractiveness, not athleticism. Also, in 2017, Cooky and her fellow researchers highlighted what they call "gender-bland sexism." That's when sports commentators downplay the accomplishments of female athletes and convey less excitement about big wins or milestones. "To me, it's like, if we can't sexualize them, then we're just not going to really talk about them at all," says Cooky. "Or, if we have to talk about them, then we're just going to talk about them in really boring and bland ways."

As a sports journalist for more than 20 years, I covered one of the most thrilling college basketball games of all-time (No. 16 Harvard upsetting No. 1 Stanford in the first round of the 1998 women's NCAA tournament) and one of the most historic World Cup games ever (the 1999 women's soccer final between the U.S. and China before 90,185 fans at the Rose Bowl). After that, I became



PREVIOUS SPREAD: © 2018 NEAE BARRY GOSSAGE/NBAE VIA GETTY IMAGES  
KAI PFAFFENBACH/REUTERS. PICTURE SUPPLIED BY ACTION IMAGES

the Celtics beat writer for The Boston Globe and went on to cover the NBA Finals, the Stanley Cup playoffs, the Super Bowl, the World Series, and the Olympics with a smattering of WNBA games, women's pro soccer, and the National Women's Hockey League thrown into the mix when time, space, and the sports budget permitted.

Now, as someone who covers stories at the intersection of sports and society for public radio and writes regular columns on women's sports for The Boston Globe and SportsBusiness Journal, I find it hard to ignore what's happening with women's sports coverage—and what's not.

More and more, female journalists, athletes, and coaches—as well as fans of women's sports—are clapping back, launching sports podcasts, crowdfunding sports websites, and advocating for better women's sports coverage. They're introducing new voices and experimenting with different approaches to coverage in niche publications. They're showing how women's sports and women's perspectives on sports can be entertaining, compelling, and potentially money making. That's crucial. Because sometimes the dearth of coverage is about economics more than anything else.

If women's sports stories don't lead to more subscriptions or more viewers, decision-makers question whether those stories are worth the investment of time, money, and talent. If women's pro soccer matches or women's pro hockey games barely draw crowds, it's hard to justify sending a senior reporter or columnist to cover them, especially for newspapers fighting for survival.

For the Globe, a combination of factors—including a shrinking sports staff, fewer print pages, and a focus on digital subscriptions—has pushed aside women's sports coverage. The paper believes it can survive by increasing digital subscriptions from its current 109,000 to 200,000. To do that, the Globe sports section has concentrated almost exclusively on what drives digital subscriptions since internal metrics show that the city's four major men's professional teams create the most buzz online.

"So, that's where we've devoted most of our resources," says former Globe sports editor Joe Sullivan, speaking about his department's approach before he recently retired. "We've added more people into covering the Red Sox, Patriots, Celtics, and Bruins, as much as we can, to get people to come to BostonGlobe.com. We want people in California to get subscriptions to read about the Red Sox. What falls by the wayside? Women's sports in general. College sports have fallen by the wayside for us, too."

For new Globe sports editor Matt Pepin, the decision tree looks the same. When it comes to women's sports, Pepin says, "We'll cover it when we know the stories have something that lifts them above a niche audience and gives them broad appeal." One example of when that happened under his leadership: in November,

the Globe sent a reporter to Killington, Vt. to cover 23-year-old skiing phenom Mikaela Shiffrin.

Among legacy news organizations, the Star Tribune and Seattle Times are outliers. Rana Cash, former assistant sports editor at the Star Tribune, knew she had something special in Minneapolis with the Minnesota Lynx, winners of four WNBA titles. "The Lynx have high engagement in terms of reader interest so our coverage reflects that," says Cash, who is now sports editor of the (Louisville, Ky.) Courier-Journal. Meanwhile, Seattle Times sports editor Paul Barrett sees something special in the Storm, the 2018 WNBA champions. When the team made the Finals, he says, the paper simply had "an opportunity to do something big for this big event and jumped on it." He adds: "As a newspaper, I feel like it's our duty to cover as many things as well as possible and give readers a well-rounded experience, and inform and entertain. I don't think what we should do is just pound people with Seahawks, Mariners, and [University of Washington] Huskies coverage only and ignore everything else, even if that makes more sense from a business perspective."

While a grassroots push for better coverage of women's sports is critical, it's still a top-down media world with change almost always spurred by major outlets with broad reach. Here's a look at what sports outlets and journalists are doing to improve coverage. And what they should be doing more.

## COMMIT TO CONSISTENT COVERAGE

If news organizations don't commit to consistent women's sports coverage, then they're helping perpetuate the biased, inaccurate belief that fans don't care about women's sports. You can't build a following for women's sports when fans don't know when or where they'll find games, features, or in-depth analysis. "Women's coverage wouldn't be around four percent if we had consistent coverage that wasn't cyclical," says the Tucker Center's co-director Nicole LaVoi. "If you could follow women's sport in season and out of season, around the calendar like we do men's sport, then that would change the landscape."

The Seattle Storm's Sue Bird agrees and adds: "There are story lines that get missed without constant coverage throughout the season." Those story lines might focus on a scoring streak, a comeback from injury, or a quest for a franchise record.

The Star Tribune and its Lynx coverage offer a model of consistency. Even with a budget that limits travel during the pre- and regular season, Cash and Lynx beat writer Kent Youngblood have made sure Lynx road games get covered, either by stringers or game stories compiled by copy desk editors. Cash says the paper's consistent Lynx coverage has paid off with a strong following.

Sports fandom, the kind that leads to website traffic, higher ratings, and newspaper subscriptions, is about more than coverage of a tournament or big race or championship game. So much of fan culture relies on getting to know athletes and building anticipatory excitement, understanding strategy, knowing statistics, and arguing about contracts, trades, and lineup changes. All of that takes consistent coverage to make an audience hungry for more.

**WOMEN'S SPORTS IN THE U.S. RECEIVE ONLY 4% OF SPORTS MEDIA COVERAGE**

## FOCUS ON LESSER-KNOWN STORIES AND TELL BACKSTORIES

Outside magazine's regular online feature the "Badass Women Chronicles" started with a casual brainstorming conversation at the magazine's headquarters in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Digital editorial director Axie Navas was talking with associate editor Molly Mirhashem about the magazine's coverage of well-known, monumental firsts, such as Edmund Hillary, the first man to summit Everest.

It's exactly the kind of conversation you'd expect at Outside Magazine. But the conversation didn't stop with Hillary and male firsts. The editors began thinking about Junko Tabei, the first woman to summit Everest. "Her story is much less known," says Navas. "Out of that came this idea: There are a lot of records that we just haven't talked about that are insanely impressive and really good stories that we've never covered." And those stories often belong to women.

The first installation of the "Badass Women Chronicles" appeared online in October 2017. Since then, the chronicles have profiled Victorian era champion cyclist Tillie Anderson and swimmer Gertrude Ederle, who, in 1926, became the first woman to cross the English Channel—doing so two hours faster than all the men before her. And there are plenty more lesser-known stories waiting to be discovered, plenty more female pioneers from the past and elite female athletes from today with unique histories that deserve more attention.

"When you know the backstories of players, of teams, of leagues, and those stories are told, people are more likely to latch on," says Bird. "I just don't know that our stories are told. I think our lives are these big mysteries and you can see it in all the misconceptions that are out there about who we are, what we do, what we ask for, what we don't ask for, how much money we make, how much money we don't make, everything across the board."

Like inconsistent coverage, mysteries and misconceptions make it hard for women's sports to build a passionate, loyal following.

## BRING IN MORE WOMEN AND ENCOURAGE MALE ALLIES

Men far outnumber women in sports media. The 2018 Associated Press Sports Editors (APSE) Racial and Gender Report Card found that, at major newspapers and websites in the U.S. and Canada, 90 percent of sports editors are male and 85 percent are white. In 2015, a report by the Women's Media Center stated that female journalists produced only 10.2 percent of sports coverage.

More effort needs to be invested in finding, hiring, and developing talented women because when women create content the conversation around sports changes in unexpected ways. Yet the responsibility for more and better women's sports coverage shouldn't rest entirely with women. Male allies need to raise their voices, too, whether it's academics who study women's sports or journalists who champion great stories about female athletes or others who choose to focus on women's sports, like Aaron Barzilai, the former director of basketball analytics for the Philadelphia 76ers who turned his attention to women's basketball and founded Her Hoop Stats.

Still, women are often behind the most different, unanticipated perspectives. Look at what happened when marathoner Lindsay Crouse, who produces OpDocs at The New York Times and occasionally contributes to the paper's sports section, took a closer look at the results from the 2018 Boston Marathon. She observed that women finished at higher rates than men in terrible conditions, including freezing temperatures, rain, and 30-mile-per-hour headwinds. Crouse wrote a Times opinion piece entitled "Why Men Quit and Women Don't." And she says, "Part of why I even thought of this in the first place was because I'm a woman. So, I think you need more women in the space seeing the ways women succeed."

Having women in brainstorming and decision-making positions makes an undeniable difference when it comes to finding and prioritizing more diverse and more inclusive narratives. "We have some really strong editors who happen to be women," says Navas. "They're often thinking about different parts of the sports world that we might not be covering and they're bringing in new writers who we might not have found."

When it comes to the value of women in decision-making positions, Alison Overholt, editor-in-chief of ESPN The Magazine and espnW, echoes those points and says, "It's crucial. It matters tremendously because you will notice and you will tease out different ideas and you will amplify different voices and open the door for different people."

## CHANGE THE CULTURE IN SPORTS DEPARTMENTS

More women assigning, writing, editing, and producing sports stories doesn't automatically translate to more women's stories. Consider The Washington Post's sports staff. It recently boasted four women covering the four major Washington D.C. men's pro sports teams. That represents progress and gender bias at the same time.

Most sports journalists, male and female, want to cover men's sports. Why? "Because that's what the culture values," says Cooky, who teaches courses on feminism and sports in American culture at Purdue. "That's where the status is. That's where the opportunity for career growth is." Meanwhile, the bylines for women's sports stories often belong to junior reporters, part-timers, or interns. Young journalists assigned to women's sports teams typically view it as a first step toward bigger and better opportunities, particularly at large, traditional media outlets.

By contrast, at the Star Tribune, Lynx beat writer Youngblood is a veteran sports reporter who's been in the business for 28 years and covered three of the four major men's professional teams in Minnesota—the Timberwolves, Vikings, and Wild—as well as the

## HAVING WOMEN IN DECISION-MAKING POSITIONS MAKES AN UNDENIABLE DIFFERENCE



BRYAN ANSELM/THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX

Green Bay Packers. He's been on the Lynx beat since 2013 and says, "I cover the Lynx the way I would cover the Timberwolves or the way I would cover the Vikings." During the WNBA season, Lynx stories appear almost daily, Lynx players and coach Cheryl Reeve find themselves the focus of lengthy profiles, and columnists attend Lynx home games fairly regularly.

Youngblood ranks the Lynx "at or near the top" of the beats he's covered because of the team's success and accessibility. "It's a pleasure to cover the Lynx," he says. "It's fun because as a writer, if you have ideas, they'll work with you to do them rather than fight you." More journalists, editors, and producers need to appreciate the opportunities that come with covering women's sports and take advantage of them. If they do, it could establish new paths for career advancement and set more significant changes in motion.

## PRIORITIZE STORYTELLING

Since launching in 2010, espnW has become the most prominent platform dedicated to women's sports and female athletes. The number of unique monthly visitors to espnW ranges from three to five million, though you often have to scroll way down the ESPN homepage to find espnW-branded content. There's also frequent criticism that ESPN and, by association, espnW could do more for women's sports. That comes with the

**The New York Times faced criticism for focusing on Katelyn Tuohy's gender rather than her record-breaking success. Here, the high school track phenom competes in New York's Section 1 track and field championships in May 2018**

territory when a media outlet calls itself the "worldwide leader in sports."

Yet when you take a deep dive into the site, it appears there's something for everyone. Here's a sampling: a long-form feature on a young Nepalese golfer with pro aspirations, multiple perspectives on the controversies at the U.S. Open involving Serena Williams and Alize Cornet, a personal essay by Olympic gold medalist Michelle Carter on lessons learned from shot putting, a slideshow featuring the top-12 players in girls high school basketball, and a profile of a 73-year-old orienteering legend.

"We talk a lot about the value of storytelling," says editor-in-chief Overholt. "We talk about opening up the stories of women athletes and women's sports to existing fans and also to the folks who may not have known, until the moment they read a story, that they could become fans of women's sports. What we're now really seeing is an emphasis on taking that women-centric storytelling and having it go everywhere at ESPN."

The long-form piece on Nepalese golfer Pratima Sherpa originated on espnW, then it was broadcast as part of the "SC Featured" documentary series. Coverage of the WNBA's 20th anniversary started on espnW, then expanded into a package for ESPN The Magazine. Stories travel in the reverse direction, too. The Undeclared's article about a young, black, female tennis player fighting racist trolls found its way onto the espnW site.

## DELIVER KNOWLEDGEABLE COVERAGE

Lynx coach and general manager Cheryl Reeve wants reporters to dive into the complexities of the WNBA and be critical. “That’s when you know you’ve made it,” she says, “when they are covering you the same as the men and they are critical—critical of me, critical of a player.” But it takes knowledge of women’s sports to understand its complexities, offer legitimate criticism, and tell great stories. “The only way you can do that is to be present more than once a week,” says Reeve. “You have to watch other games. You have to know the upcoming opponent. You have to understand matchups. You have to understand how we play.” The same logic applies to men’s sports. The difference: The information needed for deep, granular knowledge of women’s sports is a lot harder to come by than the same information about men’s sports. And that means it often requires more time and more dedication to follow and to cover women’s sports.

Take statistics. They put players in historical context. They encourage the kind of debate that fuels sports passion. They also reveal the trends and anomalies that inspire a diverse array of stories. The more statistics available, the more knowledgeable reporters and fans become. The more knowledgeable, the more engaged. It’s been that way for decades in men’s sports. But in women’s sports, statistics that go beyond the basics can be hard to find. It’s a problem the website Her Hoop Stats hopes to solve for women’s college basketball. Founded in December 2017 by Aaron Barzilai, former director of analytics for the Philadelphia 76ers, Her Hoop Stats “aims to provide consistent, reliable, and easy-to-access data about women’s basketball” and “help grow the women’s game by providing effective new tools to better understand it.” In August, Basketball Reference introduced a database for the WNBA, allowing reporters and fans to search the entire history of the league for player stats. It’s progress, though the site has 15 searchable databases for the NBA.

## GIVE WOMEN IN SPORTS MORE OF A VOICE

Better quality coverage would look a lot like the coverage male athletes get. That means not only a focus on the athleticism and accomplishments of female athletes, but also a willingness to dive into the complicated, conversation-worthy narratives in women’s sports. That’s what comes through when the co-hosts of the feminist sports podcast “Burn It All Down” start talking. “The first thing is to not be afraid of complexity,” says co-host and ThinkProgress sports reporter Lindsay Gibbs. With female athletes, Gibbs finds too often they’re boxed into an inspirational storyline, or portrayed as either a perfect person or a villain. “The truth is that like most male athletes, most women are somewhere in between, even the great ones,” says Gibbs.

How should journalists find and tell stories about women’s sports? Start by framing ideas and asking questions in ways that aren’t gender-driven. If you take a checklist approach to stories about female athletes, then it will likely lead down a path cluttered with women’s sports narratives that fall into clichéd categories about overcoming sexism or coming back from pregnancy.

At NPR’s hour-long weekend sports show “Only A Game,” senior producer Karen Given and her staff judge pitches on whether they present a compelling narrative. I contribute to the program and, during story meetings, have seen this in action. The initial conversation about pitches is gender-blind, not gender-driven. Sometimes that leads to an entire show of stories about women.

Sometimes athletes tell their own stories without narration. “One of the things that non-narrated stories allow you to do,” says Given, “is let people define the impact of struggles on their own life, rather than have reporters define it for them.” That’s especially important for female athletes because, as Given adds, “oftentimes women’s sports coverage focuses on the fact that it’s about women and not the fact that it’s about sports. When you let people describe their own lives, gender might be an important factor to them or it might not be.”

Boxing champion Heather Hardy told her story to “Only a Game” in her own words. The 10-minute piece hits on familiar, arguably clichéd, themes like overcoming economic adversity, fighting for equality, and balancing motherhood with an athletic career. But hearing Hardy describe her life story makes it feel different and more intimate. Given loves how “it’s a story about a person who has been discriminated against, but who has never been a victim.” It’s also a reminder of how much language and storytelling style matter when covering women’s sports and female athletes.

Describing her first fight, a kickboxing match, Hardy says, “Here I am the shyest girl in the world. Like I’m the girl who will walk into a room and sit by myself. But for whatever reason, walking through that crowd of 2,000 people with the spotlights and the radio on and standing in the ring and beating this girl up so bad, I felt like a million puzzle pieces came together and just told me, ‘This is what you’re here for. This is your life.’”

**Boxing champion Heather Hardy (left), shown here fighting Mexico’s Paola Torres during an April 2018 match, told her story—in her own words—to NPR’s “Only a Game”**

FRANK FRANKLIN II/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS



## IN WOMEN’S SPORTS, STATS BEYOND THE BASICS CAN BE HARD TO FIND

Giving female athletes more of a voice helps avoid some of the issues that often plague women’s sports coverage. That’s the all-too-common focus on femininity, attractiveness, and biology.

In June, The New York Times faced criticism for the article “America’s Next Great Running Hope, and One of the Cruellest Twists in Youth Sports.” It profiled high school phenom Katelyn Tuohy, and “one of the cruellest twists” was the fact that “so many gifted teenage female distance runners fizzle out by their early 20s.” That happens because young women’s bodies change dramatically during their teenage years. So, you can see the problem with describing the natural maturation of the female body, one that often involves filling out and gaining weight, as a cruel twist. But there’s also this: Recognition of Tuohy’s astounding, record-breaking success came with a sense of foreboding because of her gender.

That’s the real cruel twist. Too many profiles of female athletes contort success into something that comes with qualifiers, whether it’s the implication that it might not last or, most commonly, the comparison to male athletes in the same sport.

## MOVING FORWARD

To create an environment where women’s sports and women’s sports coverage are valued, reporters, editors, players, coaches, academics, and others need to challenge the sometimes blatantly sexist, sometimes ignorantly biased culture that persists in sports media. It can be done through publishing great stories about women, through raising awareness on social media, through hiring more women, through making an unapologetically feminist sports podcast, through supporting new websites that give platforms to women’s sports and female journalists, through publicly calling out news organizations on their lack of diversity, through producing academic studies that highlight gender inequality, and through prominently featuring women’s sports coverage.

There need to be more days like May 18 in the Minneapolis Star Tribune and September 7 in The Seattle Times when women’s sports not only get extensive coverage, but get put front and center because they deserve to be there. By devoting prime real estate to women’s sports, the Star Tribune and The Seattle Times challenge the bottom-line, metrics-driven thinking that leads editors to prioritize men’s coverage as the safest bet.

As many legacy news organizations narrow their focus to men’s pro sports because of budget and staff cuts, it presents an opportunity for female-focused sports websites and sports media startups. Take EqualizerSoccer.com. The website does impressive work covering women’s soccer in North America. It offers news stories, analysis, and podcasts on the National Women’s Soccer League, U.S. women’s national team,

Canadian women’s soccer, and NCAA women’s competitions. Meanwhile, The Athletic is beginning to invest more in women’s sports coverage because of critics and subscriber feedback. Demand for more Lynx coverage prompted The Athletic to assign two writers to cover the team. Subscribers also wanted more stories on the U.S. women’s soccer team. Now, the site has two writers focusing on that team for the soccer vertical.

As The Athletic’s media reporter, Deitsch finds hope for the future of women’s sports coverage in additions to the sports media landscape like Her Hoop Stats and “Burn It All Down.” They give a glimpse of what could encourage disruptive innovation in women’s sports coverage.

At the moment, it might be hard to imagine a feminist podcast moving from its niche with nearly 3,200 weekly downloads to a larger audience. But after the U.S. Open women’s final, when discussions about Serena Williams and sexism dominated the news cycle and after the Cristiano Ronaldo rape case made international headlines, it’s clear there is a larger audience for the kind of conversations and unique perspectives found consistently on “Burn It All Down.” Each podcast features an interview with a female sports reporter or prominent female sports figure, as well as the “Badass Woman of the Week.”

And, of course, there’s the “Burn Pile” segment. That’s the point in each show when, as the co-hosts say, they virtually “pile up all the things we hated this week in sports and set them aflame.” The burn pile typically draws attention to discrimination, inequality, and bad behavior in the sports world.

“I certainly hope the podcast is disruptive,” says co-host Shireen Ahmed. “Sports media definitely needs to be disrupted.” Ahmed, a Toronto-based freelance writer and sports activist, says the podcast started because the co-hosts were disappointed with the sports coverage they consumed. “We couldn’t help but look at sports with a critical lens,” says Ahmed. “What that means is the systems of racism, misogyny, homophobia, xenophobia that exist in sports, we want to burn them down.” Ahmed also wants to “change the face of what sports media can look like.” She’s a woman of color and Muslim and says, “I don’t look like I would be a sports writer. I don’t look like I take in sports with a critical lens. But I am and I do.” The podcast gives her an opportunity to broadcast that.

So, what does the future of women’s sports coverage look like? Maybe it will look a lot like October 17 when four of the top 10 stories on the Associated Press sports app featured women in sports. That happened even with the MLB playoffs nearing the World Series and the NBA regular season starting. Given its global reach and its business model, the AP and its stories exert more influence in the sports media world than a big city paper covering a successful WNBA team.

Still, it takes all kinds of outlets, all kinds of platforms, all kinds of advocates to improve coverage. It takes outlets like the “Burn It All Down” podcast, platforms like Her Hoop Stats, and advocates like Cheryl Reeve to show what women’s sports coverage can be and what women in sports can do. Above all, it takes a certain kind of journalistic courage and commitment. ■

The paradox of journalism  
today: Coverage is often  
exceptional, even as  
newsrooms and revenues shrink

BY JULIA KELLER

# 100 JOURNALISM UNDER PRESSURE



**A man holds up a T-shirt ridiculing the news media before a Trump rally in Rochester, Minnesota in October 2018**

JIM MONE/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

**Journalism finds itself in deep trouble these days. It faces a profound reckoning, a hinge point of existential significance**

IN AN ESSAY first published in 1999 that graces his collection “Things That Matter” (2013), the late Charles Krauthammer answered a question posed by Time magazine: Who was the most important person in the twentieth century? Time selected Albert Einstein; Krauthammer insisted upon Winston Churchill. “Without Churchill,” he wrote, “the world today would be unrecognizable—dark, impoverished, tortured.”

If we change the question, asking instead what was the most important profession in the last century, a good case could be made for journalism. Without it, large swaths of the world similarly might have remained “dark, impoverished, tortured,” because few people would have been aware of the nature and depth of the atrocities therein. You can’t fix what you can’t find. Indeed, we have only to look at places today where journalists must risk their lives to do their jobs—places such as Central Europe, described elsewhere in this issue, and Mexico, Myanmar, the Philippines, Russia, Turkey, and too many others—to appreciate anew what an incalculable difference the press made in the twentieth century, reporting on wars, famines, genocide, and the tyrants who green-lighted them.

But saving the world apparently wasn’t enough. Journalism finds itself in deep trouble these days. It faces a profound reckoning, a hinge point of existential significance.

“I fear for our profession. It’s standing on wobbly legs,” declares Alex Kotlowitz, an author and journalist who teaches at Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism. “I don’t know how a democracy survives without a robust press.”

On a single recent day—January 23—more than a thousand media jobs in the United States were eliminated when organizations such as BuzzFeed, Yahoo, HuffPost, and Gannett announced deep staff cuts. Earlier, websites such as Mic and Mashable, once deemed promising, were, in effect, sold for parts. Layoffs have already roiled digital media companies Refinery29 and Vox. And those are national platforms; the loss is even more acute at the local level, where approximately 20 percent of smaller U.S. newspapers have vanished since 2004, according to Jeremy Littau in a recent essay in Slate. “If you think there’s corruption in Washington, D.C.,” Littau warned in his piece, “what’s happening at City Hall is often worse—and in more and more places, there’s no longer anyone paid to root it out.” As if to prove Littau’s point, on February 1, McClatchy Company, owner of

the Miami Herald, The Charlotte Observer, and 27 other daily newspapers, notified employees that it will be offering 10 percent of its workforce voluntary buyouts. (You are free to add your own quotation marks around the word “voluntary.”)

James Warren, executive editor of NewsGuard, a startup that assesses the veracity of news sites, and former managing editor of the Chicago Tribune, is also concerned about the loss of hometown coverage. “You have to think local, local, local,” he says. “All the great national coverage by The New York Times and The Washington Post aside, what about state capitals and both state and local government agencies? What’s tragic is that the once fairly systematic coverage on a local level has quietly disappeared and nobody is yelling about it.”

Around the world and around the corner, then, the press is flailing. It is burdened by a rickety business model whose obsolescence seems inevitable in the wake of technological disruptions. It is bludgeoned by the constant rhetorical assaults of President Trump, whose anti-media tweets and taunts have sanctioned the notion that journalists are jealous, sneaky, agenda-driven purveyors of something called “fake news.” And—in what is perhaps the cruelest blow of all—many polls indicate that the very people journalism is intended to serve aren’t all that crazy about it, anyway.

The problem with trying to solve the mystery of who killed—or at least gravely wounded—American journalism is this: Everybody already knows the answer. Like a mediocre whodunit, the villain is obvious, the weapon a no-brainer. The true culprit? Why, it must be Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook, or one of those smart guys over at Google, who pulled off a daring daylight heist of the advertising dollars that formerly supported newsgathering organizations, or Craig Newmark, founder of Craigslist, who purloined all of those lovely, lucrative classified ads from newspapers. Isn’t that right? Or perhaps the genuine bad guys are Shane Smith and Jonah Peretti, respective kingpins of Vice and BuzzFeed, the smug, upstart media mavens who dangle shiny content before readers’ eyes—think of those bright, jangly mobiles that dotting parents suspend above a baby’s crib—having realized that our attention spans have shrunk to a nub.

The detective work continues. Essays exploring the reasons for journalism’s demise have begun tumbling out with some regularity of late from august cultural arbiters such as The New Yorker and The

MARK WILSON/GETTY IMAGES

New York Times. Newly published books by editors who led key newsrooms, such as “Merchants of Truth: The Business of News and the Fight for Facts” by former Times editor Jill Abramson and “Breaking News: The Remaking of Journalism and Why It Matters Now” by former Guardian editor Alan Rusbridger, have piled on the gloom like dirt on a coffin. In an otherwise thoughtful and incisive essay in Tablet magazine about journalism’s troubles that serves as a review of the Abramson book, Sean Cooper cracks the case in his very first sentence, with a self-assurance that would do Hercule Poirot proud: “The sensational implosion of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century American press was precipitated by a combination of hubris and negligence.” There you go. Mystery solved!

None of these theories tells the whole story. For one thing, the corpse won’t stay dead: Again and again, just when the dire reports from journalism’s front lines seem to be reaching critical mass, something wonderful happens. Up springs a story or a series or a profile or a podcast that astonishes, that sparkles, that upends what people thought they knew. We live in a golden age of nonfiction storytelling, an era when the depth, variety, eloquence, and relevance of the work being created has rarely if ever been surpassed.

Which brings us back to the central paradox of contemporary journalism: The product, in the main, is superb. Word-based wonders abound. Scintillating stories proliferate. New methods of storytelling and pioneering partnerships between for-profit and nonprofit media organizations are increasing. And yet this excellence comes as a

truly effective, long-term funding model—the means by which the marvels will be paid for—remains elusive. What Virginia Woolf knew back in 1928 is still true in 2019: “A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction ... The lamp in the spine does not light on beef and prunes.” Change the woman to women and men, the fiction to fact, and the beef and prunes to ramen noodles and Clif bars, and the lesson still adheres: Writers need sustenance. Organizations need capital.

Thus for every cheery report of an innovative new wrinkle such as ProPublica or Emerson Collective or the giddy rise of podcasts, and for every billionaire willing to pony up to save a newspaper, there is a scowling naysayer with a pen and a clipboard standing close by, checking off the names of media outlets that have gone bust or downsized so dramatically that the company directory can now be expressed as a haiku.

The juxtaposition of humiliation and triumph can be jarring. And so even as Trump tweets his all-caps smackdowns, and even as more and more journalists find themselves reliant upon wealthy benefactors like bowing sonneteers of the Elizabethan age, there is this: Time’s 2018 Person of the Year was a journalist—amalgam of the brave and eloquent people, some of whom gave their lives, as Karl Vick put it in the cover story, to “dare to describe what’s going on in front of them,” including Saudi writer Jamal Khashoggi, murdered for his columns that called out his homeland’s leadership for its oppressive ways, and the five employees of

**People line the streets in Annapolis, Maryland in June 2018 to honor the five staffers killed at The Capital Gazette**



The Capital in Annapolis, Maryland, killed by a reader who stormed the newspaper's office with a grudge and a gun.

Time's roll call of noble journalists is inspiring. However: Not to be the spider on the valentine, but the median wage for a newspaper reporter in 2017, according to the Pew Research Center, was \$34,000.

As paradoxes go, it's a perverse one. Journalism—the product itself, the words and the pictures and the sounds—is thriving, in many cases. But journalists are digging between the couch cushions for nickels and quarters for bus fare to get to work. (If they still *have* work, that is.) And news organizations are struggling to remain solvent. At the end of 2015, when Rusbridger left the editor's chair at The Guardian, the media world faced a moment of “great journalistic achievement and empty coffers,” according to James Meek in his review of Rusbridger's book in the London Review of Books, a succinct description that sadly is still relevant today: The product is superior, but the reward for producing it is nothing to write home about.

It is the spectacle of those empty coffers that haunts NewsGuard's Warren: “The primary question remains the economic one—how do you support quality journalism if the primary means of revenue, advertising, is continuing to go to Facebook and Google? It is dubious whether nonprofit models will be sustainable on any widespread basis and it is very unclear whether people will pay for quality content.

“What we don't know,” continues Warren, who, among his other challenges, had the headache of being my boss at the Tribune, “is if some of the ‘hot’ digital startups like Vox, Vice, BuzzFeed, or the Huffington Post will be around in three or four years.”

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics' Occupational Employment Statistics, cited by the Pew Research Center, jobs at newspapers—the slots for writers and editors and photographers—fell 15 percent between 2014 and 2017. Since 2004, they have dropped 45 percent.

It's hard to fault media bosses for the staff diaspora. They are, after all, like McDonald's managers: When the customers aren't thronging the counter, you have to send the hamburger-makers home. Estimated daily circulation for U.S. newspapers declined 11 percent between 2016 and 2017.

But not everyone agrees that journalism is on its last legs.

“I am congenitally optimistic, so take what I say with a grain of salt—but I'm not convinced that the things we are experiencing are different in kind from what we've survived



before,” says Katherine Mangu-Ward, editor of Reason magazine, in an interview.

In a refreshingly contrarian op-ed published in the November 18, 2018 edition of The New York Times, Mangu-Ward called the recent dustup between Trump's press-pummeling White House and CNN reporter Jim Acosta a minor sideshow, not a Maginot Line for freedom of expression. “Definitely, there is a shaking-out in journalism,” she concedes in the same conversation. “There's a lot of fuss made about damage to crucial institutions. But institutions evolve. At this moment, I don't fear that the press will cease to exist somehow in its current form.”

Jack Shafer, veteran press gadfly and senior media writer for Politico, also takes issue with the angst-ridden narrative that emanates from many media-watchers: “What the sky-is-falling types never acknowledge is that the opportunity cost of doing quality journalism has never been lower,” he says in an interview. “I would rather be a reader in 2019 than in any year you could choose.”

In many ways, it is indeed a sweet time for storytellers. Reporters can do their work anywhere. Records can be accessed with an ease undreamt of by an earlier generation forced to hang out amidst musty archives stored in courthouse basements, paging through dusty page after dusty page, inhaling sour lungfuls of atomized mouse droppings. There is, moreover, a sprightly nimbleness to the contemporary media world. One of my favorite magazines,

**Members of the Arab-Turkish Media Association and supporters demand justice for slain Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi during funeral prayers in Istanbul in November 2018**

The Weekly Standard, ceased publication in late 2018, but it was, in effect, swiftly reborn as The Bulwark, a site where you can find the work of the Standard's top writers and editors. Not since eighteenth-century London, perhaps, when newspapers and journals came and went with the speed of a *bon mot* tossed off by Samuel Johnson, could publications fizzle and revive like this, without a lot of fuss and folderol, just an intense passion for words and ideas.

Other sorts of transformations are less bracing than they are bittersweet. A wistful illustration of the new world order in media came in a December 25, 2018 essay on TheAtlantic.com by Austin Murphy, 57, who spent more than half his life—33 years—as a staff writer for Sports Illustrated. I remember his work well: the revelatory profiles of athletes, the knowledgeable accounts of single crucial games. There was a special quality to his prose, a freshness, a crisp lucidity. As I read his stories, I was always sure that if I ever met him, he'd have a twinkle in his eye.

These days, Murphy is twinkling not for SI but for Amazon: He delivers packages in the vicinity of his California home for the online Ozymandias. His essay, though, is not a plea for pity. It's a lesson in perspective: “Lurching west in stop-and-go traffic on I-80 that morning, bound for Berkeley and a

**The problem with trying to solve the problem of who killed—or at least gravely wounded—American journalism is this: Everybody already knows the answer**

day of delivering in the rain, I had a low moment, dwelling on how far I'd come down in the world. Then I snapped out of it. I haven't come down in the world. What's come down in the world is the business model that sustained Time Inc. for decades. I'm pretty much the same writer, the same guy.”

As charming and affable as Murphy's essay is, there's a note of sadness tucked in there, too—not for him, but for us. He might be a crackerjack delivery person, but he's an even better writer. I'd rather read his take on Urban Meyer, the recently retired head football coach at my alma mater, Ohio State, than have him ring my doorbell and drop off that copy of “The Anatomy of Melancholy” I just ordered. Meyer says he won't ever coach again but I don't believe him, and neither does anybody else, and we need a good reporter—we need Murphy—to give us the skinny.

The humbling of the Time Inc. empire was unfortunate, but not every large, important media company has suffered the same fate, thanks to the largesse of wealthy individuals—a bit of a mixed blessing, Warren believes.

“We have boutique journalism on niche subjects that is wonderfully supported by wealthy individual patrons who truly care about journalism. Those efforts have been

very positive,” he says. “But what happens when these billionaires lose interest? Or when they are gone and their heirs do not have that interest?”

Among the new generation of media patrons are Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, who bought The Washington Post in 2013, and Patrick Soon-Shiong, the billionaire surgeon and biotech entrepreneur who purchased the Los Angeles Times and a handful of other California papers in June of 2018. Laurene Powell Jobs, widow of Apple impresario Steve Jobs, founded Emerson Collective as a rubric under which she buys media companies. Her portfolio thus far includes a majority stake in The Atlantic, and investments in a variety of documentary production companies and nonprofit media entities such as ProPublica and The Marshall Project.

Indeed, some of the best journalism produced today comes from just such partnerships, just such cobbled-together projects for which participants pool creativity and initiative and resources. The New York Times often teams up with the PBS program Frontline and ProPublica. National Public Radio, too, has been known to join forces with Frontline.

The nonprofit model—aided by generous

**Trump supporters engage with CNN journalist Jim Acosta at a rally in Fort Myers, Florida in October 2018**



EMRAH GUREL/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS  
OPPOSITE: NINA BERMAN/NOOR/REDUX

donations from civic-minded benefactors—a dynamic one, enabling the rise of online-only news organizations such as The Texas Tribune, founded in 2009, and MinnPost, founded in 2007, which covers Minnesota. Mangu-Ward's Reason, like Mother Jones, functions as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit.

But for many small local news organizations, print and broadcast, the kind stocked with scrappy, intrepid reporters who keep a close eye on, say, how local tax dollars are spent and what local elected officials are up to, the financial situation continues to be dismal. In mid-January, for instance, the East Bay Express, a plucky alternative paper known for its investigations and arts coverage in the Oakland, California area for four decades, announced that it was laying off most of its staff.

Help has come from programs such as Report for America, a nonprofit endeavor that sends reporters into places where press coverage has slacked off, and that bills itself as a combination of “AmeriCorps, Teach for America, the Peace Corps and the nation’s best nonprofit news organizations.” A similar effort is underway in Britain, where an entity called the Local News Partnership recently was launched. There, citizens pay a license fee that funds the BBC. Beginning last year, part of that fee goes to newspapers in small towns, enabling them to hire more reporters.

But is tin-cup journalism—which has turned a once-dignified profession into a permanent GoFundMe page—really the answer? If a media organization can’t make it as a bona fide business, does it deserve to survive? How long is long enough to subsidize a faltering news operation?

Shafer, whose Politico columns reveal an affinity for puncturing journalistic pomposity, wonders the same thing. “In my own self-interest, I’d like to see more and better local coverage,” he says. “But I wonder why it is that readers don’t seem to want to pay for it.”

Sounding like a contemporary version of that eloquent misanthrope H.L. Mencken, Shafer adds, “We often blame newspaper editors for the shoddiness of the paper. But we let readers off the hook. Is there a great reader demand to know what happened at City Hall or at the sewer commission meeting? By and large, the answer is no. But no one likes to shame the reader, because it sounds elitist.”

Matters are certainly not helped, of course, when the most powerful person in the world continues to pull out his digital pea shooter and let fly. Typical was this flurry of tweets on January 7, 2019, in which President Trump offered a familiar critique of

journalists: “Many have become crazed lunatics who have given up the TRUTH! ... They use non-existent sources & write stories that are total fiction ... The Fake News Media in our Country is the real Opposition Party. It is truly the Enemy of the People!”

Might this playground invective do lasting damage—not only to the press but also to the nation? Or will it eventually come to seem like the pitiful ravings of a desperate, flailing man as the walls close in around him—a sort of Lear Lite?

“At this point,” says Robert Schmuhl, emeritus professor of American studies and journalism at Notre Dame and the author of several books and essays about the presidency, “we don’t know whether Donald Trump is an anomaly or an augury.”

In his forthcoming book, “The Glory and the Burden: The American Presidency From FDR to Trump,” Schmuhl uses a chapter to explore the historically fraught relationship between the country’s CEOs and their bothersome Boswells. “Presidents since Washington have complained—sometimes in salty and unrestrained terms—about news coverage,” he points out. “Much of the time, though, they expressed that criticism behind closed doors.” It’s different now, as other sources of power have become available. Hannibal had his elephants—and Trump has his Twitter account.

“He’s using dangerous language,” warns Jacqui Banaszynski, emeritus professor at the University of Missouri’s School of Journalism and editor of Nieman Storyboard. “The same words are used in countries with authoritarian regimes.”

Mangu-Ward, however, continues to be skeptical of the notion that contemporary journalism can be summarized as a cage match between Trump and, say, CNN. “We’ve had a lot of practice runs at full-fledged hysteria about how Trump’s tweets will be the end of the press as we know it,” she says. Such anxiety is “part of the culture wars. Only people on the left are asking about the future of journalism. People on the right don’t ask that. The left sees the press as part of their team. So they’re worried about members of their team.”

Owen Youngman, who has held the Knight Chair in Digital Media Strategy at Northwestern since 2009, also is reluctant to regard Trump’s tweets, as unfair and juvenile as they might be, as a *sui generis* assault on media. “I read Robert Caro and it doesn’t seem like LBJ liked the press all that much, either,” he says. “How many mayors of New York were happy with Jimmy Breslin?”

Undeniably, Trump sometimes has a



Journalists and supporters display signs, including one depicting President Rodrigo Duterte as a clown, during a protest advocating freedom of the press in Manila, the Philippines in January 2018

**The positive news is that superb journalistic work is still being created in the midst of this catastrophic revolution**

TED ALJIBE/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

point. There *is* such a thing as fake news. In late 2018, Der Spiegel reporter Claas Relotius, a seven-year veteran of the magazine based in Hamburg, Germany, confessed to having made up dozens of stories. As Ulrich Fichtner stated in a December 20, 2018 Der Spiegel report on the epic fraud: “Inventions. Lies. Quotes, places, scenes, characters: All fake.” Previous fabulists have become quasi-household names: Jayson Blair, Stephen Glass, Patricia Smith, Janet Cooke. The publications they besmirched with their serial fibs are, respectively, The New York Times, The New Republic, The Boston Globe, and The Washington Post. (For a poignant but clear-eyed essay about what it’s like to find out that a journalistic colleague has been making it all up, read the 2014 piece by Hanna Rosin on the Glass case, “Hello, My Name is Stephen Glass, and I’m Sorry,” published in The New Republic.)

Admittedly, that’s not what Trump really means by “fake news.” He means stories that he doesn’t like. Yet the fact that news organizations have, by and large, always been willing to admit their mistakes—quickly, publicly, and thoroughly—is admirable, and furthermore distinguishes them from their chief antagonist.

So as the tabula rasa of 2019 looms before us—whither journalism?

Will we continue to see creative and investigative riches delivered by an evolving business model? (“Evolving” is a polite euphemism for “nobody knows what the hell to do and so everybody’s trying everything under the sun.”)

Jim Kirk, former editor of the Los Angeles Times and the Chicago Sun-Times who now runs Crain’s Chicago Business, says that he is optimistic that the funding conundrum will eventually be solved: “It’s

not just advertising anymore. There’s a continued search for revenue streams outside of the traditional to sustain the journalism that we know is important. You have to be very aggressive about that.” But it won’t be easy, he acknowledges. “Right now, we’re in this long gray period.”

In “The Blue of Distance,” a luminous essay from her collection “A Field Guide to Getting Lost” (2005), Rebecca Solnit describes the process by which chrysalises turn into butterflies: “The process of transformation consists mostly of decay and then of this crisis when emergence from what came before must be total and abrupt.

“The strange resonant word *instar* describes the stage between two successive molts, for as it grows, a caterpillar ... splits its skin again and again, each stage an instar,” she continues. “It remains a caterpillar as it goes through these molts, but no longer one in the same skin. There are rituals marking such splits, graduations, indoctrinations, ceremonies of change, though most changes proceed without such clear and encouraging recognition. *Instar* implies something both celestial and ingrown, something heavenly and disastrous, and perhaps change is commonly like that, a buried star, oscillating between near and far.”

Journalism’s fate is poised somewhere between “heavenly and disastrous,” in Solnit’s phrase, as its practitioners grapple with challenges unique to the present moment—the petty but ultimately perishable insults doled out by @realDonaldTrump—and other challenges that are as old as the first abacus: making the arithmetic work. Right now, it doesn’t. Not even for the all-digital media organizations, once touted as the hip, savvy saviors of the news business.

Yet we muddle on through the darkness. Or perhaps we muddle on *because* of the darkness; you don’t know what you truly value until you are forced to contemplate its absence. The positive news is that superb journalistic work is still being created—it’s right there at our fingertips every minute, delivered via page, screen, and earbud—in the midst of this catastrophic revolution in how media is produced, financed, distributed, and accessed. Imagine how bleak it would be to have the opposite problem: a sound economic model but a crisis of content. Rich, thriving media organizations—and *meh* stories. The trick lies in finding a large enough audience for these literary miracles, and in something more prosaic still: paying the bills. It’s a scary time, but it’s also an exhilarating one.

Journalists, welcome to your instar. ■

**JOURNALISM  
UNDER PRESSURE**

# THE FREE PRESS UNDER THREAT IN CENTRAL EUROPE

Despite financial challenges and government pressure, Central European independent newsrooms are finding ways to keep reporting

BY LENKA KABRHELOVA



**O**N FEBRUARY 26, 2018, Slovak investigative journalist Marek Vagovič rushed through the morning traffic of Bratislava. Early that morning his boss, Peter Bárđy, editor in chief of online news portal Aktuality.sk, summoned him to the office for an urgent meeting. He didn't explain why.

Sitting in his car, parked in front of the office complex, Vagovič received a text from a friend. A young couple was reportedly murdered in Vel'ká Mača, a small town about 40 miles from Bratislava. Vagovič, a veteran reporter who has dedicated the last two decades to untangling stories of corruption and blurred lines between business and politics in Slovakia, quickly figured out that one of the victims was a member of his investigative team, 27-year-old Ján Kuciak.

"I was paralyzed," recalls Vagovič, who had recruited Kuciak to Aktuality two years before.

Ján Kuciak was a rising star of the investigative team. He was shot dead at home, together with his fiancée Martina Kušnírová, just a few days before Aktuality had planned to run his year-long investigation about the activities of Italian criminal organization 'Ndrangheta in Slovakia. The piece raised questions about high-level political corruption in Slovakia, suggesting links between the local mafia and senior politicians of the Slovak governing party Smer (Direction/Social Democracy).

Now, months after the initial shock, sitting in a conference room adjacent to Aktuality's newsroom, Vagovič is still coming to terms with what happened: "Such a thing affects you until the end of your life. All of us will forever think about what we could have done differently, how we could have boosted security."

Kuciak's bosses had offered to take measures to ensure his safety before publishing the explosive article. But, according to Vagovič, the young journalist had declined: "He thought that there was no special threat, that we lived in a civilized country and something like that wouldn't happen. Well, we all were wrong."

Kuciak's murder was the first killing of a journalist in Slovakia in its modern history. And it left the country shaken, along with the rest of Central Europe. Slovakia and its neighbors—the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary—have seen worrying trends in journalism for years.

In May 2017, Czech President Miloš Zeman called for journalists to be "liquidated" while standing next to Russian President Vladimir Putin. In November 2016, former Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico denounced journalists as "dirty anti-Slovak prostitutes." In January 2016, Poland's conservative government introduced a new media bill that effectively secured its control over state broadcasters. Months later, mass protests forced the same government to scrap another proposal attempting to limit the number of reporters allowed to cover the Polish parliament. In addition to Poland, there have been government attempts to control public media in Hungary and Slovakia, and the "oligarchization"—acquisitions by wealthy businessmen—of leading media houses throughout the region.

"The traditionally safe environment for journalists in Europe has begun to deteriorate," concluded Reporters Without Borders (RSF) in its 2018 annual report.

These trends—the ascent of populist leaders, rise of isolationism, nationalistic rhetoric, right-wing extremism, hatred toward minorities, and attacks against the press—are the same around the world, be it Manila, Washington, or Budapest. In Central Europe, a massive change in media ownership after the financial crisis of 2008-2009 was an important catalyst in bringing about these threats to the free press.

Against the backdrop of the crisis and collapsing business models,



**A man holds up the final edition of Népszabadság at a 2016 demonstration in support of the paper in Budapest, Hungary**

**PREVIOUS SPREAD:**  
**A memorial for Ján Kuciak, the Slovak journalist murdered in February 2018, in front of the Aktuality.sk office in Bratislava**

media owners fled the sector and, in the case of foreign owners, left the region as a whole, according to Václav Štětka, researcher and lecturer in Communication and Media Studies at Loughborough University in the U.K. The ownership vacuum was quickly filled by the only people with money at the time: rich businessmen who had amassed wealth in the 1990s during the messy transformation from Communist to market economies. Often, those were people with close ties to senior politicians.

In Hungary, for example, oligarch Lajos Simicska, a longtime friend of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, created a vast media empire credited with paving the way with its positive coverage for Orbán's election victory in 2010. In 2015, after a public fight between the two men, Simicska's media started publishing critical stories about the government, and the influential businessman decided to support the Hungarian opposition. Three years later, after another Orbán election victory, Simicska sold all of his assets, and his media group returned to the pro-government camp.

Close ties between business and politics play an important role in the ability of governments to control media. Market size also plays a role. Poland is a market of almost 40 million people, while the Czech Republic and Hungary have populations of 10 million and Slovakia only 5 million. The markets are distinct in structure, as well. There are strong public media outlets in the Czech Republic, but traditionally much weaker public media outlets in Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary. Historically, Poland has had a strong print media; the other countries, not so much. Across the four countries the level of domestic and foreign investment varies.

What follows is a consideration of the challenges and opportunities for the free press in each of the four countries.

## HUNGARY

Currently ranked "partly free" by Freedom House's press freedom index and 73<sup>rd</sup> in the Reporters Without Borders 2018 press freedom list (down from 23<sup>rd</sup> in 2008), Hungary has experienced the steepest fall of all Central European countries. "It's deteriorating at a very fast pace," says Márton Gergely, an editor at Hungary's current affairs weekly HVG.

Until three years ago, Gergely was deputy editor in chief of Hungary's once most read—and now defunct—broadsheet, Népszabadság ("People's Freedom"), a left-leaning daily founded as a Communist party organ during the 1956 Hungarian uprising against the regime. The paper, which was privatized in 1990 and became the country's number one political daily, was abruptly closed by its new owners in 2016. Financial losses were cited as the reason at the time, although employees were convinced that the daily was shut down because of articles critical of right-wing Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. The paper was shut down just days after it had broken stories of alleged corruption involving senior government officials.

The story of Népszabadság's closure is, according to experts, one example of how since 2010 Orbán and his Fidesz party has slowly taken Hungarian media under almost total governmental control. One of the first measures of Orbán's government was to set up a special body, the Media Council, which

oversees all media output and has powers to sanction organizations for breaking the rules, which include providing "balanced" news content. The council members are named by the parliament, where Orbán's party has a supermajority. It also controls the public media, where government anti-immigrant and anti-E.U. policies have been given increasingly more space, unchallenged by critics.

Private media, often struggling financially, have been bought up by new owners. Formerly independent outlets critical of the government, such as commercial television channel TV2, changed coverage to almost exclusively positive. Origo, once the most-read news portal in Hungary, known for its investigative stories, now rails against migration and anti-Hungarian conspiracies, favorite government talking points.

TV2 and Origo are among the top 10 publishers receiving government advertising, according to investigative website Atlatszo. Over the last eight years, the Hungarian government has spent almost \$250 million on advertising and communication campaigns, mostly sending anti-immigration and anti-E.U. messages, the portal claims.

In November of last year, the owners of the majority of pro-government media in Hungary formed a conglomerate, the Central European Press and Media Foundation, which will run more than 470 outlets across the country as a nonprofit. The conglomerate covers newspapers, TV channels, radio stations, online portals, and local papers. It is led by Orbán loyalists.

"The government created its own media ecosystem," says András Pethő, senior editor and co-founder of Direkt36, a nonprofit investigative news platform he and former colleagues from Origo founded after becoming disillusioned by the political pressures on the news portal. By the spring of 2018, in time for the parliamentary elections, "you could see that they were not producing journalism. They were pushing the agenda of the government. It was all about George Soros, migrants, attacking the opposition. Even the language was very similar to the language of the politicians." Soros, an American billionaire investor of Hungarian origin, is targeted by Orbán's nationalist government for supporting refugees and philanthropic projects.

In April 2018, shortly after the parliamentary elections, the British paper The Guardian spoke to several employees of the state-funded MTVA network, who admitted amplifying government messaging and even airing false stories in order to push through the government's anti-immigrant agenda.

## Slovakia and its neighbors—the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary—have seen worrying trends in journalism for years

Direkt36 is one of the few media outlets in Hungary attempting to hold the government accountable. The startup publishes investigative stories on corruption and ties between Orbán's family and influential businessmen. It is also part of international investigations, such as the Panama Papers. In 2016 Direkt36 published a series of articles about the hidden assets of Hungarian parliament members and other political officials. Recently it delved into circumstances around the fall of Lajos Simicska.

In a highly polarized environment, trust in news in Hungary is low, at only 29 percent, according to the 2018 Digital News Report by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Recent changes in media, along with new labor legislation, sparked a fresh wave of discontent among the public. In December 2018 thousands of Hungarians protested at the state television headquarters and demanded independent public media and government accountability.

With only 8 percent of consumers willing to pay for content, though, small nonprofit startups, such as Direkt36, have to be inventive in attempts to approach their audience. "We have a pretty good reach. But it's getting more and more difficult. There are fewer and fewer outlets who could pick up our stories and bring them to their audience, which is obviously a problem," says Pethő.

Pethő believes Direkt36's business model—which is based on grants, private donations, and, increasingly, on crowdfunding—is sustainable. "We try to offer something in return, in the form of exclusive content," he says. "We are trying to build a community. We have a special newsletter for our supporters. We publish e-books, organize events and workshops." Since 2015 about 3,000 people have donated to Direkt36, according to Pethő, and almost half of the startup's expenses were covered through crowdfunding. "I'm afraid that if we're going to talk again in four years, the situation will be even worse," he says. "There is no nicer way to put it."

## SLOVAKIA

Some 120 miles northwest of Budapest, in the Slovak capital Bratislava, the mood is not much brighter.

Beata Balogová, editor in chief of SME, the main broadsheet in Slovakia, is increasingly worried about the spillover effect. “Developments in Hungary are so concerning and serve as such an inspiration to politicians in other countries,” says Balogová, who also serves as a vice-chair of the International Press Institute, an organization promoting press freedom and the improvement of journalism standards across the world.

The murder of Ján Kuciak has led to an otherwise unlikely situation: close cooperation among competitors. Leading papers, portals, and TV channels—Aktuality, Trend, Denník N, SME, public TV and commercial channels Markíza and JOJ—joined efforts and shared their reporting on the case.

In March 2018, mass anti-corruption protests brought down the government of Robert Fico, prime minister and head of the political party Smer, who had been criticized for cultivating a culture of corruption, cronyism, and clientelism. By September 2018, the Slovak police had confirmed that Kuciak’s journalism was the reason the couple was shot. Four people were arrested and charged with “premeditated murder and other crimes.”

Slovakia, too, has experienced a decline of public trust in media in recent years. To many in the country, however, the murder highlighted the importance of independent journalism. “Already before the murder, investigations of our team and especially Ján Kuciak’s pieces were well regarded. But after his death the interest spiked sharply,” says Vagovič of Aktuality.sk, part of Ringier Axel Springer publishing house. “People trust us much more now. It’s been apparent from the numbers [of read articles], engagement, reactions to our texts.”

His investigative unit felt a direct impact: What used to be a team of three reporters is now a group of 10 writers publishing a new piece every day. The news portal continues to publish stories of developments in the police investigation of Kuciak’s murder. According to Reuters’ Digital News Report, Aktuality.sk was in 2018 the second most used online news source in Slovakia. It has more than 2 million monthly users. Since September the portal introduced a “soft version” of a paywall; while the content remains free, its readers can contribute about \$5 monthly to support the investigative team. The subscribers are offered various benefits, such as a newly published and highly anticipated book

about Kuciak and his stories.

Denník N, one of the most successful media startups in Slovakia and perhaps in all of Central Europe, has also seen a steady increase of public support. It was founded in 2014 after almost two dozen journalists—including editor Matúš Kostolný—left the most important Slovak broadsheet, SME, in a protest over powerful investment group Penta’s entry into the ownership structure. Penta was involved in several political scandals, including the so-called “Gorilla Scandal” in 2012, which alleged widespread bribery of officials in return for winning lucrative public-procurement and privatization contracts.

Denník N’s success is also due to the fact that it put its stories behind a paywall right from the start. “People got used to paying for content,” says Kostolný, who is now Denník N’s editor in chief. Over the past four years, at least 100,000 users bought subscriptions. Kostolný is convinced that the mental barrier of having to pay for online journalism is gradually cracking. He considers the subscription model an important condition for keeping media independent: “If we want to convince people that they should make a long-term investment in us, we need to be skillful and able to produce good journalism.”

Public broadcasting may be the next battlefield. RTVS, Slovakia’s public radio and TV broadcaster, is increasingly conforming to the government, according to observers and its former journalists. In May 2018, several leading reporters and editors were forced to leave or left the company in protest against alleged management misconduct. That same month, dozens of Slovak journalists published an open letter raising concerns over the leadership: “The new management of RTVS is bullying, pressuring, and firing its longtime journalists, who in the last few

## Kuciak’s murder has led to an otherwise unlikely situation: close cooperation among competitors

years contributed to restoring public trust in the public media.”

“Our concern was first sparked when experienced journalists leading the news were replaced by former government spokespeople who were clearly in a conflict of interest,” says Matúš Dávid, a former foreign desk editor who spent five years in RTVS television broadcasting. In January 2018, RTVS management decided to shut down the only investigative program it had. The open letter signed by 60 RTVS journalists described an atmosphere of fear and voiced concern over attempts to push a political agenda in the news. RTVS management defended its decisions and promised to revive the investigative show. But concerns linger.

“No one stood above my desk to direct me what to say. But that’s not the point,” says Dávid. Loss of independence, he says, can be achieved in other ways: using false equivalency of opinion in news pieces, combining facts with speculation, inviting in the role of trusted experts analysts who are known for disseminating Russian propaganda or spreading conspiracy theories. “All we tried is to tell them that it’s not possible to balance the truth with lies.”

**Matúš Kostolný, editor in chief of Denník N. Previously editor of the daily SME, he resigned to protest new ownership**



## CZECH REPUBLIC

In the Czech Republic, media ownership concentration has had a negative effect, though it also has been linked to a record number of media startups in all segments of the market.

In 2013, Andrej Babiš, a billionaire businessman who was appointed prime minister after he and his party won the general elections in 2017, obtained control over the second biggest paper in the country, Mladá fronta DNES, news portal iDNES.cz (with 4 million monthly users), and another broadsheet, Lidové noviny. Four months after his purchase of the MAFRA publishing house, Babiš, running on an anti-corruption platform, won a seat in the Czech parliament. His political party joined the government coalition, and Babiš himself became finance minister. Today, Babiš, through his companies, owns two dozen publications, a national radio station, and a couple of small television stations.

Babiš is just one of a number of Czech businessmen who are new owners of important media outlets, all of whom deny seeking influence through their assets. In 2017, a leaked tape suggested otherwise. In the recording, Babiš discussed coverage of his opponents with a journalist from his own paper.

The question for the new Czech outlets is, how financially sustainable will they be? Deník N, a Czech version of the successful Slovak outlet Denník N, launched in October 2018. According to editor in chief Pavel Tomášek, the team got an initial investment from the

Institute of Independent Journalism, but also won financial support from its prospective audience. Before it published a single story, Deník N raised over \$300,000 in a crowdfunding campaign and registered 5,000 subscribers. It plans to reach 20,000 subscribers and become profitable within four years. The news site, which also started selling print copies in January, is seen as a test of the Czech audience’s willingness to pay for content; many of the online stories are behind a paywall.

In 2018 Seznam.cz, the longtime number one Czech news site, launched its own TV news channel, Seznam Zprávy. In November 2018, Seznam ran a story about Babiš’s son, Andrej Jr., who claimed he was forced to travel to Crimea in an attempt to avoid police questioning connected to his father’s business activities. The story sparked a debate about journalism and ethics. Critics questioned the Seznam reporters’ decision to use a hidden camera and a slightly sensational tone in the piece. The debate pointed also to another issue in journalism: increased polarization.

“There is less and less classic news reporting,” says Pavla Holcová, editor of the Czech Centre for Investigative Journalism. “Czech journalism is dominated by commentary. The question is, why is it happening? Sometimes it feels like in the tense competition, journalists think that their stories need to be more polarized to catch the attention of the audience.”

While Czech public media remain among the most trusted outlets in the country, they face challenges, too. In 2014, Jan Rozkošný and three other members of a team producing

**A sign at a 2018 rally in Prague protesting Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš reads, “Enough lies, resign and it will be better”**

a respected current affairs show on Czech TV left the public broadcaster after one of the show’s top presenters was removed from the program. Rozkošný and his co-workers suspected that political pressure on TV management was behind the maneuver, although the organization’s editorial leadership denied it. The journalists who left the program founded DVTV. It quickly became successful and now supplies videotaped interviews, live debates, comments, and reports to Aktualne.cz, one of the largest Czech online portals.

Tough questions combined with rich presenting skills earned DVTV frequent criticism from politicians, notably from Babiš, who refuses to give it interviews or answer questions from its journalists during press conferences. The style is welcomed by the audiences, though. In 2015 the startup raised almost \$100,000 within a single month.

Czech public media face criticism for efforts to distribute air time equally to all political parties, including fringe and extremist voices, and confusing objectivity with a false equivalence. “Public TV and radio are today the crucial sphere where the fight over the future of media in Central Europe is going on,” says Jacques Rupnik, professor of political science at Sciences Po in France. “Public media is supposed to guarantee the public debate, but suddenly they are under the pressure of powerful forces.”

## POLAND

In early December 2018, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Poland's most widely circulated broadsheet, published a list of 19 lawsuits. All of them, the paper explained, have been brought in recent years against it by the governing party, PiS (Law and Justice), and institutions it controls. The paper faced lawsuits from the Justice Department, from Polish public television broadcaster TVP, and from the governing party and its members, all disputing critical articles that raised questions about how Polish taxpayers' money was spent, among other issues.

Roman Imielski, national editor at *Gazeta Wyborcza*, says: "They want to force us to self-censor. The second problem is money. We must hire lawyers; we must defend ourselves in the courts."

Since taking over the government in 2015, the PiS party has introduced measures to consolidate the media. National TV and radio broadcasters, TVP and Polskie Radio, and Polish press agency PAP are practically controlled by the state. More than 200 journalists were forced to leave or were fired, and government spokespeople or individuals with close ties to the ruling party were put in charge. "The focus was always on television, because it has the highest reach and, they believe, the highest influence on the voters, especially those who voted for the populist nationalist government," explains Grzegorz Piechota, a senior visiting research fellow at the Reuters Institute for the Study for Journalism.

Today, the Polish government also targets private media. "They step up both direct intimidation and financial pressure. State-owned institutions and companies that do business with the government are reluctant to advertise in media that the government sees as an opposition," says Piechota. Companies like *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Agora publishing house, commercial TV channel TVN, and Ringier Axel Springer publishing house (owner of the Polish *Newsweek*) have suffered a loss of advertising.

The PiS campaign against foreign-owned media recently prompted a diplomatic spat with the U.S. ambassador in Warsaw Georgette Mosbacher. In a private letter to Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, the ambassador voiced concerns over attacks against private television channel TVN. The company, which is owned by American media group Discovery, remains one of the few independent sources of news in the Polish TV world. After TVN broadcast an investigative piece about a neo-Nazi gathering

in the south of the country, law enforcement showed up at the house of the cameraman and Polish authorities charged him with promoting Nazi propaganda.

TVN remains the most widely watched independent TV channel, at a time when all television outlets in the country report an annual loss of viewers, according to the 2018 Digital News Report from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Journalists from TVN's news station TVN24 infiltrated the neo-Nazi group and worked undercover. Their video footage showed members dressed in Nazi uniforms, gathering to celebrate Adolf Hitler's birthday with a cake decorated with a swastika and the colors of the Third Reich. The documentary triggered a discussion about the rise of Polish far-right groups and the response of the current right-wing government, which critics blame for overlooking the problem. TVN's management insists the piece was created "in accordance with the standards of investigative journalism" and said it would consider treatment of their cameraman by Polish prosecutors as intimidation. It's not the channel's first run-in with authorities under the PiS government. In 2017 TVN was ordered to pay a fine of \$415,000 for its coverage of December 2016 anti-government protests, which the Polish media regulator found "promoting illegal activities and encouraging behavior that threatens security." The fine was later silently withdrawn, after the U.S. government raised concerns on behalf of the American owners of TVN.

In response, news startups are emerging in Poland, too. Outlets including Outriders, VSquare, and NewsMavens are exploring a variety of funding models, from subscriptions, crowdfunding, and advertising to grants and alternative revenue sources, such as offering writing services to non-profit organizations. Outriders, an online magazine published in Polish and English, is dedicated to international affairs. Its ambition is to offer its readers deeper context surrounding global affairs and improve journalism through a debate led by a network of international reporters and writers. VSquare is a platform uniting investigative media from the Visegrad region—Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary. Since 2017 the site has been publishing stories about Central European countries, often created in cross-border collaboration. NewsMavens positions itself as an alternative to both traditional and new media—it presents the latest news from Europe as seen exclusively through



**Holding a sign reading "stop hate," a woman is among hundreds gathered in front of state-owned TVP's headquarters in Warsaw, Poland in January, protesting what they consider biased broadcasting**

**In Poland, it is small news organizations that are most vulnerable to growing hostility from authorities**

JAAP ARRENS/NURPHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES

female journalists' eyes. Women recommend stories they consider newsworthy, in an attempt to break through the limits of European newsrooms—where, according to the website, women hold only 27 percent of top management jobs.

Sites that were started mostly as email platforms and news aggregators, such as Onet and Wirtualna Polska, are stepping up their original journalism efforts. OKO.press, a fact-checking and investigative site, launched in 2016 with initial funding from Agora, the publisher of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, and *Polityka*, the largest liberal weekly in Poland, is self-sustaining. The bulk of the roughly \$50,000 monthly budget comes from private donations of OKO's readers; the rest is a combination of revenue from grants and crowdfunding campaigns. In

a section titled "Truth or lie," OKO.press monitors statements by politicians and state and church officials, and provides facts, background, and context. It publishes original investigative stories as well, focused on politics, the environment, and the church. It chronicles the behavior of law enforcement during public protests and anti-government demonstrations.

According to Piechota, it is small news organizations, such as OKO.press, that are most vulnerable to growing hostility from authorities: "It's like a reminder for journalists that they need to be much more careful than they used to be, because the police are behaving much bolder than before." The expense of legal advice is particularly challenging for cash-strapped media startups. Even bigger publications like *Gazeta*

*Wyborcza* aren't immune. The paper is being boycotted by government and PiS politicians, says Imielski, and often has to resort to legal action when authorities refuse to provide information.

"It is like a wall between the government and our readers. We sell around 100,000 print copies a day, but on the internet we have more than 6 million users. And our readers don't have a chance to read interviews with the most important people in the country," Imielski says.

Nationalism, right-wing populism, and hostility toward the press are contributing to a growing polarization in Poland and across Central Europe, just as in other parts of the world. "This is like a civil war; of course, without a weapon," says Imielski. "But language is a weapon, too." ■

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# “IT’S NOT JUST ABOUT REAL ESTATE ANYMORE”

How newsrooms are  
tackling the complex  
issues that contribute  
to and result from  
the growing housing  
affordability problem

BY SUSAN STELLIN





IT IS FAIR to say that the housing beat has not traditionally been considered a plum assignment among reporters. In fact, many media outlets do not have a team dedicated to housing issues—except for real estate reporters, who typically focus on the market for buying or selling a home. While the collapse of the housing bubble dominated headlines a decade ago, stories about foreclosures faded as the economy recovered and construction of luxury condominiums resumed, particularly in cities where many journalists work.

But the cranes hovering over the skyline overshadowed a different storyline that was developing, pushing housing back onto the front page.

During the past couple of years, housing affordability has increasingly been recognized as a crisis affecting communities throughout the United States. From high-tech hubs like Seattle and San Francisco to Midwestern markets like Chicago and Detroit, people are getting priced out of their homes. Stories about evictions and rents that are out of reach now profile people earning a wide range of incomes, and housing insecurity is more broadly understood as impacting those forced to move in with friends or relatives as well as individuals sleeping on the street.

“The issue of housing affordability has moved up the income level,” says Christopher Herbert, managing director of the Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard University. “Suddenly it’s not just a problem for the poor. It’s a problem for the middle class, too.”

News organizations have responded by tackling topics that both contribute to and result from the growing affordability problem, including corruption and fraud among

developers of low-income housing, unfair property tax assessments, discrimination, foreclosure auctions, homelessness, and illegal or unethical evictions. Investigative reporters are digging into data, filing FOIA requests, and knocking on doors to find residents willing to speak on the record, producing work that has prompted policy changes in some cities.

Herbert identifies two options he believes warrant more media scrutiny: increased housing assistance for lower-income households and more development of high-density housing, both policies he acknowledges are controversial.

One hurdle for journalists is understanding and explaining the intricacies of a complicated market, similar to analyzing how inflated housing prices contributed to the financial collapse. “It is hard to get at the truth when you have such a large complex system,” Herbert says.

Laura Sullivan, an investigative reporter for NPR and Frontline, took on the challenge of explaining that complexity for the film “Poverty, Politics, and Profit,” which examined how two key federal programs fail to meet the need for affordable housing in the U.S. Working with producer Rick Young and co-producers Emma Schwartz and Fritz Kramer, Sullivan followed three women attempting to use Section 8 vouchers to find a place to live in Dallas. The vouchers cover the difference between what renters can afford to pay and the monthly rent, but only one in four people in need of assistance get them—and many landlords won’t accept them.

Sullivan sensitively explores the fraught racial and class divide that underlies some resistance to this program, interviewing one stay-at-home mom, Nicole Humphrey, who explains why she does not want voucher holders as neighbors. “The lifestyle I feel like that goes with Section 8 is usually working single moms or people who are struggling to keep their heads above water,” Humphrey says. “And it’s not—I feel so bad saying that. It’s just not people who are the same class as us.”

## THE HOUSING BEAT HAS NOT BEEN CONSIDERED A PLUM ASSIGNMENT AMONG REPORTERS



Asked what it was like to have that conversation on camera, Sullivan says, “I was grateful to her for explaining the problem and being honest about it. I think it was eye-opening because she was expressing what other people feel and the more you can air that and get it out in the open the better.”

The film also explores the history of the Fair Housing Act and investigates why the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit costs the U.S. Treasury more, annually (about \$8 billion), with fewer units getting built. Sullivan interviews developers who pleaded guilty to corruption related to this program, but also addresses the fundamental challenge of building housing for workers earning less than \$20,000 a year. “You can’t work at a fast food restaurant and live in America, period,” Sullivan says. “There was a time when you could.”

In order to get a more well-off audience to stick with a complex narrative—rather than tuning out due to sympathy fatigue—Sullivan thinks it’s important to build in what she called “an accountability piece. If you go in and just describe how difficult it is to either find housing or afford housing you lose a lot of people. It seems like one more sad, impossible thing to fix.”

Holding powerful people accountable was also a key theme in Jason Grotto’s four-part

series, “The Tax Divide,” published by the Chicago Tribune and ProPublica Illinois. Based on a two-year investigation that involved analyzing more than 100 million computer records, the series documented the unfair property tax assessment system in Cook County, Illinois, which overvalued the homes of poor residents and undervalued higher-priced homes.

“When I first went to my boss, he said, ‘So we’re going to basically say people aren’t paying enough in property taxes?’” Grotto recalls, recognizing that the paper’s readers were more likely to live in undervalued homes. “I said the issue isn’t how much do we pay in property taxes—the issue is how is that burden distributed among people and is it fair.”

Grotto ended up partnering with Christopher Berry, a professor at the University of Chicago’s Harris School of Public Policy—even co-teaching a graduate-level class to students who helped with research for part of the series. “I’m a firm believer that collaboration is key,” Grotto says. “The idea that we’re going to do it all ourselves is sort of an old way of thinking.”

The series revealed serious problems with Cook County’s model for determining property tax assessments, as well as issues with the appeals process that made the system

**Aaron Ervin is a resident of one of Seattle’s peer-run tent cities that have ties to social welfare programs**

**PREVIOUS SPREAD: Nine-year-old Jack and his temporarily homeless family were profiled by The Seattle Times**

even more unfair. Grotto anticipated some pushback from the assessor’s office—but not the press conference that was held to attack his work. Ultimately, an independent study commissioned by Cook County corroborated Grotto’s findings, and assessor Joseph Berrios lost his bid for re-election in 2018.

Although the political and statistical threads might’ve put off some readers, the series included an interactive tool so local residents could find out if homes in their area were over- or under-valued, as well as multimedia clips explaining things like how property taxes are calculated, and videos featuring homeowners struggling to pay excessive bills.

“Housing stories are tough,” Grotto says. “There are a lot of technical aspects and a lot of financial details and it takes time to dig through that stuff. At the same time, there are few things that are more important in individuals’ lives than their homes so I think there’s a lot of great storytelling to be done.”

For The New York Times series

“Unsheltered”—about tenants in rent-regulated apartments being pushed out of their homes by aggressive landlords—Kim Barker says finding people willing to share their stories took a lot of research, negotiation, and time: “I didn’t want to start with a worst-case scenario. You want to write about how the system handles an average case and to find an average case you have to pick through a lot of data.”

Barker and her colleagues were able to get five years of New York City housing court data—more than a million cases—but those records did not indicate how each case was resolved so the team had to build a spreadsheet themselves.

The focus of the series was how weakened housing laws and a lack of oversight have allowed landlords (often, corporations or investors) to harass tenants into leaving rent-regulated apartments. Those tactics might include scheduling noisy, off-hours construction, making dubious renovation claims in order to push apartments into the free market, or filing eviction suits based on fraudulent accusations of lease violations. But out of fear of reprisals or landing on a tenant blacklist, renters can be reluctant to discuss their cases on the record.

“You’re talking about having somebody talk publicly about their landlord which is a really difficult thing to do,” Barker said. “I’m very honest about what will happen—I say your name is going to be out there. I don’t let people approve or change their quotes, but I go through the parts that involve them. I do that with landlords, too. They need to know exactly what I’m going to say about them because I want to know if I’m wrong.”

To illustrate the loss of rent-regulated apartments, the series included a graphic of a building in Upper Manhattan that had 66 regulated units in 1996, 19 of which were free market apartments by 2018—renting for an average of \$3,875 a month.

Some readers posted comments suggesting that people who can’t afford New York City should move elsewhere, pointing out that “Trying to get through housing court to evict a deadbeat tenant in a timely manner is virtually impossible,” and asking, “Where’s the story of empty nesters with vacation homes in Florida maintaining their rent controlled pied et Terre [sic] so they can come see Hamilton on Broadway?”

“We were shocked by some of the comments,” Barker says. “My editor was just like, ‘When did people become so mean?’”

As with many topics in the current political climate, stories about affordable housing can prompt a range of reactions—some

PREVIOUS SPREAD: ERIKA SCHULTZ/THE SEATTLE TIMES  
SHANNON STAPLETON/REUTERS

thoughtful, some vitriolic—heightening journalists’ ethical responsibility to consider who they choose to profile and anticipate how those sources will be viewed. Another New York Times article, about the demolition of a public housing complex in Chicago, featured a woman with 13 children, a fact that for some commentators overshadowed almost every other aspect of the story.

That response points to an issue that frequently comes up in comment sections and social media posts: how much individuals are responsible for their own housing woes.

“A lot of people attribute the problem to personal responsibility rather than the systemic challenges that exist,” says Diane Yentel, president and CEO of the National Low Income Housing Coalition, which is trying to shift public opinion about affordable housing and the hurdles low-wage workers face. “Often you see a lot of outright racist or very racially tinged comments that get at our very complicated racial history.”

Her organization publishes an annual report called *Out of Reach*, which calculates how many hours someone making minimum wage would have to work in order to afford a two-bedroom home at a fair market rent. This year, that report was searchable by zip code, making it easier for reporters to analyze the data down to the local level.

“Out of Reach this year got 1,100 media stories in its first month of publication, which is the same as we got last year in six months,” Yentel says. She views that as a sign of increased media coverage of the housing crisis, but also a result of providing relevant data to local reporters who may lack the resources to crunch the numbers themselves.

One change she has seen with recent coverage of the housing crisis is more of an effort to explain the roots of the problem:

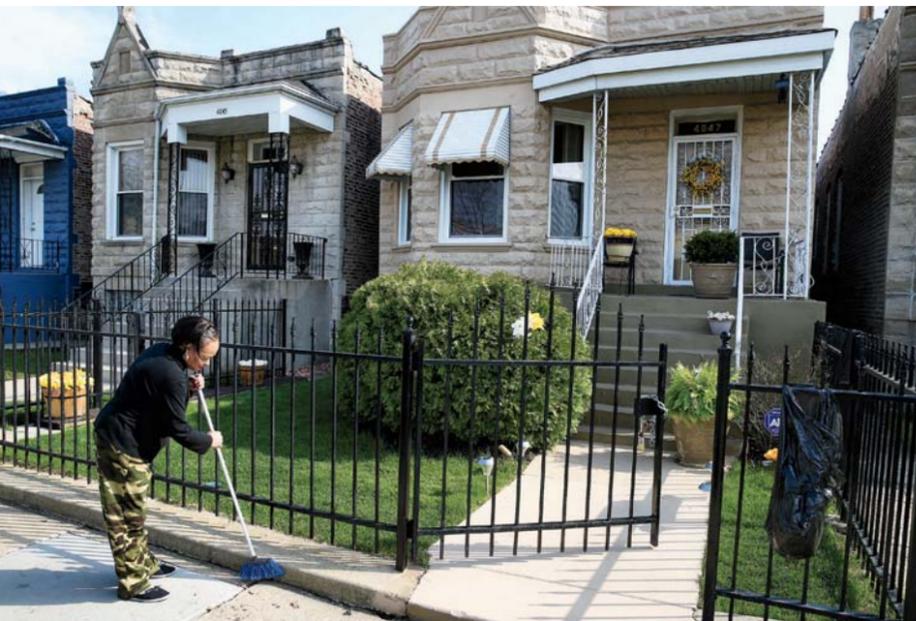
major cuts to the Department of Housing and Urban Development’s budget dating back to the Reagan administration, more people entering the rental market because of foreclosures, millennials delaying homeownership due to student debt, and stagnating wages as rents rose.

However, she’d like to see better access to timely housing data, noting that her organization relies on sources that can be years behind what’s happening in local communities, and also more stories that debate solutions. “We put out solutions every chance we get,” Yentel says, expressing frustration with media coverage that doesn’t explore how problems could be fixed. “Sometimes I’ll be on a radio show and we’ll spend 10 minutes talking about the problem and then the segment is over. Change will only happen when we recognize and talk about and educate people about solutions.”

That can be tricky territory for journalists, who may feel that ethical guidelines about objectivity compel them to refrain from weighing in on solutions or to give equal weight to both sides of a debate. So an article about a proposal to build affordable housing in a higher-income neighborhood would typically include quotes from supporters and opponents, without favoring either group.

But as audiences gravitate toward media outlets that reflect their own views, some readers want reporters to include more insight and perspective in their stories. Others appreciate reporting that offers enough context and expertise for them to make up their own minds about an issue, rather than investing time in an article or segment that feels inconclusive.

**Reporter Jason Grotto found that several of the homes on this Chicago block were assessed at too high a value by the county**



## HOLDING POWERFUL PEOPLE ACCOUNTABLE WAS A KEY THEME IN “THE TAX DIVIDE”

Kriston Capps, who writes about housing, architecture, and politics for The Atlantic site CityLab, covers federal and state housing policy as part of his beat, which has included reporting on HUD’s budget, the impact of lending practices on housing segregation in St. Louis and Jacksonville, and how tax law changes may affect home values in places like Connecticut. “That’s kind of our sweet spot: finding those local stories that have some national relevance,” he says, recognizing that shrinking local media means there are fewer reporters attending meetings where zoning regulations and development proposals get discussed. “Housing is a beat in every place, but not every place can afford to have that beat writer.”

He also focuses on the ways housing overlaps with other social issues, such as education, economic opportunity, and health. For instance, an article about the healthcare provider Kaiser Permanente’s \$200 million investment in addressing homelessness and building affordable housing highlighted the intersectional approach some communities are trying to embrace. That multi-faceted view also has implications for how news is reported—moving away from the silos dictated by newspaper sections and supporting teams of reporters with different areas of expertise. But it also requires deciding what topics to prioritize among the many issues housing affects.

Although he believes more reporters are focusing on social equity, particularly since the recession, he hopes real estate coverage evolves into more of a watchdog role, seeking out sources who have access to information and are willing to share it. “There are a lot of public servants who really, really know this stuff and want to talk to reporters about it,” he says.

For the NBC Bay Area series “Kicked Out,” investigative reporter Bigad Shaban and producer Michael Bott filed a public records request to find out which San Francisco landlords had evicted rent-controlled tenants based on a law that allows these evictions if the owner or in some cases a family

member plans to move in. “We thought surely the city must require some type of documentation,” Shaban says. “To their credit, the city didn’t try to hide it. Basically they said we don’t check at all.”

So Shaban, Bott, and their team built a database using the eviction records, mapped out efficient routes for their door-to-door reporting, and went to more than 300 homes over six months. They discovered that in one in four cases where they were able to confirm who was living there, the owner or a relative had not moved in.

Ultimately, they got more than 100 responses—some landlords who had indeed moved in, some people who didn’t want to talk, and some tenants who were surprised to find out that they were being overcharged. Although the law allows owners to find a new tenant if their plans change and they don’t occupy the home, they are not allowed to raise the rent to market prices, which have skyrocketed with San Francisco’s technology boom.

The 10-part series includes a map that allows viewers to see if their address was subject to an owner move-in eviction, along with instructions on how to file a rent reduction request. After the series aired, the city tightened up oversight of these types of evictions, and increased the penalty for landlords who abuse the system.

However, Shaban emphasizes, “This was not a story about tenants vs. landlords—this was a story about fraud. We got feedback from some landlords saying thank you for doing this.”

One of the people they interviewed is Angelique Rochelle, a tutor who was paying \$1,805 a month for a rent-controlled apartment in San Francisco when she and her three children were evicted so the landlord’s mother could move in. The landlord rented to new higher-paying tenants instead, but Rochelle couldn’t find a large enough apartment she could afford, so her two older children went to live with their father and she and her daughter moved to an apartment in Oakland.

In a city where a family making \$117,000 a year qualifies as “low income,” these kinds of evictions illustrate how housing insecurity has spread, challenging news organizations to cover the impact on different demographics and the implications for communities where only the wealthy or lucky longtimers can live.

Since television reporters often have to tell a story in a 60-second segment—about a 250-word script—Shaban’s investigative unit was fortunate to have far more time for



*I'd like to see, are treated in a  
Equal status. NO one so far themselves  
from Homelessness. I'd advocate less waste  
an Empty unoccupied Buildings and  
set them up for studio or large apartments  
with incentives/tax breaks instead of the way  
they have it set-up where you get tax breaks  
for unoccupied Buildings.*  
Deborah B

their series. While online videos tend to run longer, there is still some debate about the attention span of a modern media audience, despite evidence that viewers will watch an entire film on their phones.

Antonia Hylton, a correspondent and producer for “Vice News Tonight” on HBO, did a story last December about a tax foreclosure auction in the Detroit area that has been viewed more than 700,000 times on YouTube. The 11-minute segment chronicles how Judy Kelley lost her home because she couldn’t keep up with the property taxes, simultaneously following Steve and Stevey Hagerman, the investors who paid \$3,711 for her home—one of more than 300 they bought through the auction.

It’s a complicated narrative that overlaps with the issue Jason Grotto covered in Chicago. In Hill’s case, she was being taxed on an assessment that was 10 times higher than what she paid for her home. Earning about \$2,000 a month as a social worker,

**Residents of a Seattle tent encampment shared their stories in The Seattle Times’s “Portraits of Homelessness” series**

she got behind on her tax bill and ended up owing more than \$20,000 in back taxes and fees, so the city sold her house in the foreclosure auction.

“We contacted Judy and the Hagermans before we ever knew their stories were going to intertwine,” Hylton says. “It just so happens that as we were reaching out to the Hagermans, they were eyeing her house.”

How to handle that intersection was one of many ethical issues Hylton wrestled with, reaching out to colleagues to get advice on questions like whether it was OK to buy Kelley lunch or pay for her to take an Uber to meet them—given that the Vice crew was taking up hours of her time in the middle of the day.

“What do we do in return to make sure she’s not exploited or financially harmed?” Hylton asks, noting that journalists don’t

talk enough about these issues, especially with respect to interviewing sources from backgrounds that are very different from their own.

Hylton is African-American and works with two producers who are also women of color, for an outlet with an audience that can be sensitive to depictions of class and race. That's why she and her team pushed for an 11-minute segment, so they could present the complexities of the situation Kelley and many other Detroit homeowners faced.

"In a six-minute piece or a two-page article, it's very hard to go line by line and say here's what they're dealing with," she says, mentioning the challenge of living in an over-policed community or the lack of educational opportunities or jobs. "Often there are a lot of things missing contextually that are really important. The things that viewers get frustrated about and call you out on are the nuances that get lost."

At the same time, Hylton's interactions

with the Hagermans are not judgmental, giving them the opportunity to explain their business model and challenge what Steve refers to as the stereotype of "the big bad investor."

Media coverage of public housing and lower-income homeowners typically focuses on people of color, and Hylton says her race helps her establish trust and build rapport in environments where sources might otherwise be more guarded: "When I walk into a room, often they're relieved that I look the way I look. There's an immediate understanding—not that I'm going to be their best friend, but that I see them as a person."

Another story Hylton worked on, about residents losing their homes in a public housing complex in Cairo, Illinois, is noteworthy for where the key interviews take place. Although viewers see peeling paint and evidence of broken plumbing during a brief tour of one family's apartment—the result of mismanagement by the local

housing authority—Hylton interviews them outside in the grass with children running around a playground in the background. That affords the family the dignity of being able to talk about their situation without being judged for a visual setting beyond their control.

For the foreclosure piece, Hylton and her team were fortunate to be able to spend time in Detroit before they started filming, and she was familiar with the area because her father grew up there. But national news organizations based on the coasts have been criticized for how they've covered the rest of the country, sometimes flying in crews that seek out sources who fit the stereotypes they had before they landed.

That can be an issue even when reporting on communities closer to home: how to find, understand, and frame a group of people experiencing something many of us haven't lived through ourselves.

One topic that tends to be particularly

fraught for news organizations is how to cover the homeless, whose ranks have been growing as the housing crisis has spread, especially in cities along the West Coast. In Seattle, officials declared homelessness a state of emergency in 2015 and since then The Seattle Times has expanded its coverage of different facets of this challenge, with support from local foundations, the Seattle Mariners, and Starbucks.

Erika Schultz is a staff photographer who has worked on many projects about housing insecurity, including the 2017 series "Portraits of Homelessness." She and reporter Tyrone Beason visited tent encampments near Pioneer Square, asking residents if they wanted to share their stories.

The series was conceived as a collaboration with participants "to create a portrait that would be a fair representation of themselves," Schultz says, so she found a battery-operated mobile printer and asked each person how they wanted to be

photographed—often letting them choose the pictures they liked. "We gave up some autonomy to allow for better representation," she says. "The goal was for them to help shape their own narrative."

Each person was invited to write something on the images she printed, which were scanned and posted online as well as exhibited at the Seattle Public Library. An accompanying article by Beason describes the diverse paths that led the two dozen participants to these camps, which were shut down by the city shortly after their visit.

Like Hylton, Schultz has had to confront a lot of ethical questions in her reporting, like whether it was OK to buy a meal for a homeless family she profiled for a multimedia story called "Jack's Journey," or if it would alter the course of the story if she connected them with services. "I would call up my editor pretty regularly and walk through scenarios," Schultz says. "It's really challenging to navigate and it's emotional

to navigate as well ... especially when there are children involved." She emphasizes the importance of having detailed conversations with sources up front, then checking in frequently as circumstances evolve. "Especially with minors," she says, "It's important to really think about whether we should add last names."

Perhaps more than writers—who at least get hundreds of words to explain a complex topic—photographers are challenged to change how viewers think about housing insecurity, finding imagery that goes beyond foreclosure signs and pictures that reinforce stereotypes about the homeless, particularly as the affordability crisis expands.

"It isn't just people who are sleeping on streets or camping or living in RVs," Schultz says. "It's people who are doubled up or are facing eviction, and people who are living in temporary or emergency housing. It looks a lot of different ways so I think it's really important to document that." ■

## FROM COVERING THE HOUSING CRISIS TO LIVING IT

BY SUSAN STELLIN

ONE SIGN OF the growing precariousness of the housing market is the willingness of people working in the media to open up about their own struggles. That may also reflect an era of more transparency about journalists' lives, but first-person accounts about dealing with an underwater mortgage, an eviction, and being homeless inevitably reinforce the broader message about housing insecurity: This affects us, too.

Ryan Dezimmer's Wall Street Journal essay, "My 10-Year Odyssey Through America's Housing Crisis," chronicles his experience purchasing a home on the Gulf Coast of Alabama in 2005, then moving out of state and becoming an absentee landlord. Since he couldn't sell the house for

anything close to what he owed on the mortgage, he rented at a loss for years. Then, in 2017, he asked for time off to finally go put it on the market.

"My editor said, 'Let's pitch a story about underwater houses 10 years later and we can use your story,'" Dezimmer recalls, adding that the challenge was "how to do it tastefully and not have me whining about being a victim." Although he was uncomfortable with the idea at first, he realized that stories like his got overshadowed in coverage of foreclosures and the market's recovery. "Here are my colleagues writing 'the buyers are back' and I'm thinking, 'Wait, the guy who abandoned the house next to me could be buying a house and I'm still stuck?'"

Dezimmer covers the financial markets and real estate for The Wall Street Journal and now lives in Brooklyn, where there's little talk of underwater mortgages, but he heard from many readers who have been in similar straits.

"I had hundreds of emails that required a thoughtful response because they were spilling out their own stories," he says, noting that the experience gave him a better understanding of the risks of the real estate market and what it's like to be a landlord. "In a lot of what I read there's an assumption that the landlord is a bad person. But I'm aware of the business and the ins and outs of it and that helps me in communicating with them."

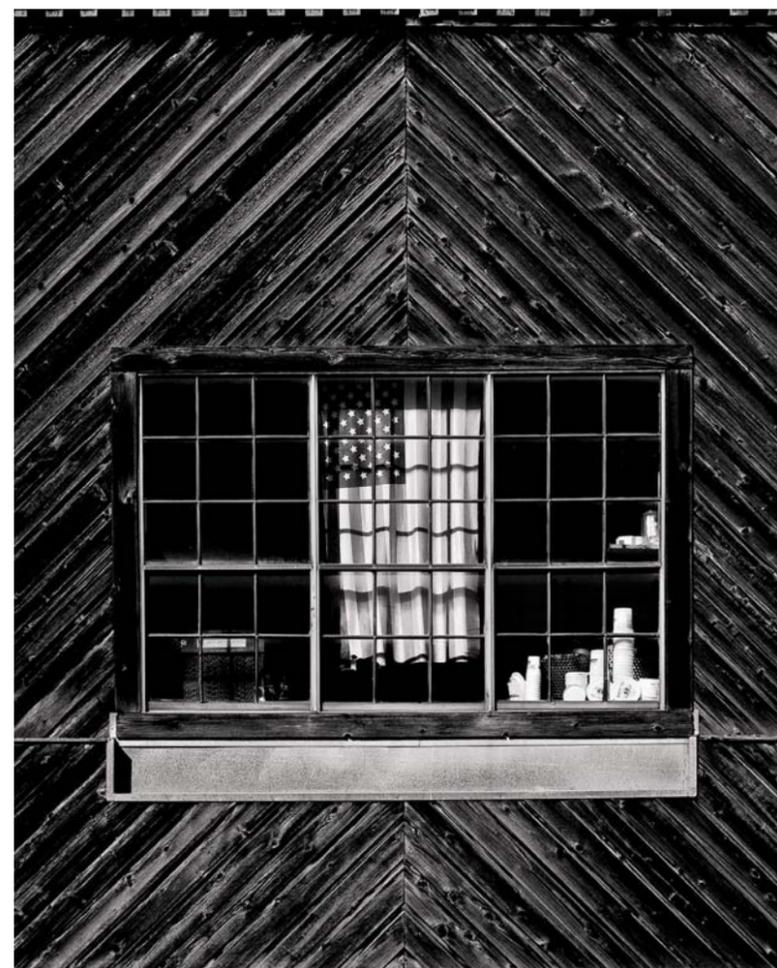
Like Dezimmer, Joseph Williams wanted to use his experience to tell a broader story: how a career setback can lead to eviction, even for someone who once had a stable, middle-class life. With support from the Economic Hardship Reporting Project, Williams wrote a story for Curbed called "Evictionland," which describes his trajectory from renting a \$2,000-a-month apartment in D.C. to losing his job at Politico, getting evicted, and joining what he calls "the ranks of the homeless."

It's a candid account of his denial as he fell behind on rent, dodged the property manager,

and eventually ended up in housing court facing eviction—still thinking, "I'm middle class, with a white-collar career. I shouldn't really be here." But he also weaves in housing statistics, the history of the tenant advocacy movement, and quotes from sources explaining the systemic issues that have led to a life that, for many, is a lot more precarious.

"Writing about it was a bit of a catharsis for me, but I was also hoping to shine a light on a problem that's not just happening among the poor," says Williams, who now works for U.S. News and World Report and is renting a room in a shared home. "It's also encroaching on working class and middle-income people. One slip can happen and many of us would be on the street and I think that is not emphasized enough in coverage of housing."

The way he describes being escorted out of his apartment by sheriff's deputies, and the cheap black plastic bags the eviction company used to pack up his things, paint a vivid portrait of the shame



ROBERT SHULTS

A view from Waller Creek, an urban waterway in Austin; its many tunnels often provide shelter to Austin's homeless population

and humiliation of the process, which doesn't always get conveyed in eviction stories.

"It was difficult to write and it was difficult to have people know what happened—and it's very much needed I think," Williams says, adding that he hopes stories like his "will not only engage more people but also prompt solutions more quickly."

Robert Shults, a freelance photographer based in Austin, shared advice from his brief experience living on the streets in "A Formerly Homeless Photographer On How To (And Not To) Photograph Homeless People," a Q&A for Photo District News. The interview addresses a range of topics, including issues of consent and how to portray homelessness.

"The major flaw that I see visually is primarily one of superficiality," Shults says. "Because the imagery itself is so striking and so outside the norm presumably of the photographer's experience there's a tendency to not dig a lot deeper."

During the months he was homeless in 2001, he said

the hardest part for him was living entirely in public, which has made him sensitive to photographing vulnerable people without engaging them and asking permission first. For a project called "The Small Corners of Existence," Shults went in a different direction, photographing the doorways, plazas, and other places he used to seek shelter. Although the black-and-white images evoke many themes about urban life, Shults says, "It was actually a way for me to cope with losing my job and this fear of being homeless again."

He now does freelance work, publishing in outlets like The New York Times and Wired, but finds himself wrestling with journalism debates about the line between objectivity and advocacy.

"Altering the situation as little as possible often means not helping," he says. "But having gone through this experience, it's rare that I encounter an objective, neutral photograph or visual depiction of homelessness that I find affecting. It almost seems impossible to not advocate." ■

1966

**Robert Caro** is the author of “Working: Researching, Interviewing, Writing,” a collection of vivid, revealing recollections about his experiences researching and writing his acclaimed books “The Power Broker” and “The Years of Lyndon Johnson.” The book will be published by Penguin Random House in April.

1975

**Wendy Moonan** is the author of “New York Splendor: The City’s Most Memorable Rooms,” in which she investigates the city’s best private residential spaces, from Brooke Astor’s elegant library to Gloria Vanderbilt’s bedroom. It was published by Rizzoli in October.

**Elaine Shannon** is the author of “Hunting LeRoux: The Inside Story of the DEA Takedown of a Criminal Genius and His Empire,” which was published by William Morrow in February. The book, about the legendary international criminal Paul Le Roux, has been picked up for film and television rights by filmmaker Michael Mann. Shannon and Mann last worked together in the early 1990s on the television mini-series “Drug Wars: The Camarena Story,” which was adapted from Shannon’s 1988 investigative book “Desperados: Latin Drug Lords, U.S. Lawmen, and the War America Can’t Win.”

1979

**Frank Van Riper’s** photography book, “Recovered Memory: New York and Paris 1960-1980,” a visual meditation on time and place, was published by Daylight Books in October.

1984

**Maurice “M.R.” Montgomery** died at the age of 79 in Massachusetts on July 23, 2017. A native of Montana, Montgomery wrote for The Boston Globe for many years, and was the author of several books about nature and the outdoors, including “Many Rivers to Cross: Of Good Running Water, Native Trout, and the Remains of Wilderness” and “Jefferson and the Gun-Men: How the West Was Almost Lost.”

1985

**Vicente Verdú** died in Madrid on August 21 at the age of 75. He regularly wrote for El País, where he also held positions as director of the op-ed pages and head of the culture section. In 1997, he was awarded Spain’s Miguel Delibes National Prize of Journalism as well as the González-Ruano Prize for Journalism. He also was a painter, poet, and author.

1987

**Marites Danguilan Vitug** is the author of “Rock Solid: How the Philippines Won Its Maritime Case Against China,” which was published in the Philippines by Ateneo de Manila University Press.

1998

**Howard Berkes** has retired, leaving NPR after 37 years at the news organization. During his career there, Berkes received more than three dozen national journalism awards, including four Edward R. Murrow Awards and four IRE Awards while a member of NPR’s investigations team.

2004

**Masha Gessen** is the winner of the 2018 Hitchens Prize, awarded annually by the

Dennis & Victoria Ross Foundation in partnership with The Atlantic to recognize a journalist who, in the spirit of the late Christopher Hitchens, demonstrates a commitment to free expression and the pursuit of truth. The award comes with a \$50,000 prize.

**Indira Lakshmanan** has been named the executive editor of the Pulitzer Center, which supports over 150 enterprise reporting projects on global issues. Most recently, Lakshmanan was the Newmark chair in journalism ethics at the Poynter Institute. She is a columnist for The Boston Globe.

**Geoffrey Nyarota** is the author of a new book, “The Graceless Fall of Robert Mugabe: The End of a Dictator’s Reign,” which was published by Random House ZA in August. The book examines the factors that led to the ousting of Zimbabwe’s president and the impact of his presidency.

2006

**Chris Cobler** has been named the publisher of the Victoria Advocate, a daily independent newspaper in Victoria, Texas. Cobler will continue to be the paper’s editor, a role he has had since 2007.

2007

**Eliza Griswold** is the author of “Amity and Prosperity: One Family and the Fracturing of America,” which was published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in June. In the book, Griswold tells the story of the energy boom’s impact on a small Pennsylvania town and one single mother and her transformation into an unlikely activist. Griswold has also been named a contributing writer to The New Yorker, covering religion, politics, and the environment.

**Andrea McCarren** won her 22nd Emmy Award, from the National Capital Chesapeake Bay Chapter of The National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, for news reporting in 2018, as well as a National Gracie Award for her investigation of rape in the military. McCarren recently left her job at WUSA9 in Washington, D.C. to begin a new role as chief content officer at PenFedCredit Union, where she’ll lead a team producing stories about active service members, veterans, and military families.

**James Scott** is the author of “Rampage: MacArthur, Yamashita, and the Battle of Manila,” a history of the battle, led by General Douglas MacArthur, to liberate Manila from Japanese troops during WWII. It was published by W.W. Norton in October.

2009

**Rosita Boland** has been named NewsBrands Ireland’s 2018 Journalist of the Year for her work at The Irish Times. Boland was also awarded the Scoop of the Year award for her interview with the then-boyfriend of Ann Lovett, a 15-year-old schoolgirl who died giving birth in a field in 1984. At the time, Lovett’s death played a huge role in Ireland’s national debate about women giving birth outside marriage, and it was raised often in the run-up to the country’s 2018 abortion referendum. Boland’s essay collection, “Elsewhere: One Woman, One Rucksack, One Lifetime of Travel” will be published by Doubleday in May.

**Margie Mason** is a recipient of a McGraw Fellowship for Business Journalism from the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at the City University of New York, which awards journalists

grants up to \$15,000 to support ambitious coverage of critical issues related to the global economy and business. Mason will research labor abuses and international supply chains.

**Guy Raz** is the host of a new Spotify podcast series, “The Rewind,” which digs into the stories behind some of the world’s most famous musical artists. The first episode, featuring producer David Guetta, debuted on October 29.

**Tommy Tomlinson** is the author of a new book, “The Elephant in the Room: One Fat Man’s Quest to Get Smaller in a Growing America,” published by Simon & Schuster in January. It is a candid chronicle of Tomlinson’s struggle with his weight, his first steps toward health, and explores how he—and America as a nation—got to this point.

**Chris Vognar** will be joining the Houston Chronicle in March to cover arts and features. Previously, he was a culture reporter at the Dallas Morning News.

2010

**Monica Campbell** is the new volunteer instructor in charge of the San Quentin News Journalism Guild at the San Quentin State Prison in California. The guild trains inmates in writing and reporting for the prison’s monthly newspaper, the San Quentin News, which is distributed to prisons throughout the state. Campbell continues in her role as a senior editor and reporter for PRI’s “The World.”

**Beth Macy** has penned a new book, “Dopesick: Dealers, Doctors, and the Drug Company that Addicted America.” Published by Little, Brown and Company in August, the book is an in-depth

examination of the opioid crisis in America.

2011

**Tony Bartelme** is a silver award winner in the 2018 American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) Kavli Science Journalism award. He was recognized in the small newspapers category for “Scum,” his report for the Charleston, S.C. Post and Courier on the impact of destructive algae blooms.

2012

**James Geary** is the author of “Wit’s End: What Wit Is, How It Works, and Why We Need It,” an exploration of wittiness, from its role in innovation to why puns are the highest form of wit. It was published by W.W. Norton in November.

2013

**David Abel** is the filmmaker behind a new documentary, “Lobster War: The Fight Over the World’s Richest Fishing Grounds,” which chronicles a longstanding conflict between the U.S. and Canada over the so-called Gray Zone, a 277-square-mile body of contested waters that fishermen have long fought over. The film premiered at the International Maritime Film Festival in Maine in September, where it was runner-up to the grand prize award in the feature film category.

**Borja Echevarría** is the managing editor of El País, Spain’s leading newspaper, a position he assumed in July. Previously deputy managing editor at El País, Echevarría was most recently vice president and editor in chief of digital news at Univision.

**Alexandra Garcia** has joined The New York Times’s team

Remembering Chris Cousins

In a time of toxic politics, the Maine Legislature united to honor the 2007 Nieman Fellow

BY CRAIG WELCH AND JAMES M. SCOTT



**Chris Cousins with his wife, Jennifer, and son, Caleb, during his Nieman year**

Even though our 2007 Nieman fellowship year ended little more than a decade ago, two of our classmates have since died: Associated Press photographer Anja Niedringhaus, who was murdered in her car by a police officer in Afghanistan in 2014; and Chris Cousins, statehouse bureau chief for the Bangor Daily News, who died in August after a heart attack at just 42.

From the outside, they could not have seemed more different. Anja had traveled the world while Chris had spent his entire life in Maine. Yet both had a

fierce affinity for people with little power or means.

Chris was the youngest member of our class and the least experienced, but there was so much to learn from him. In his work and his life, Chris had a boundless generosity. He was always quick to volunteer to help at a Sounding, to shovel a driveway, to offer a lift to the airport, or a kind word.

When Nieman Damakant Jayshi told Chris in 2010 that he planned to quit the newspaper he helped found in Nepal without knowing what came next, Chris encouraged him, adding, “Kudos for following your heart.”

Nieman Alagi Yorro Jallow, who ran a struggling independent newspaper in Gambia before coming to Cambridge, said Chris was the first classmate to reach out and congratulate him when Gambians finally embraced democracy in 2017.

In a time of toxic politics, with media credibility under constant assault, Chris’s integrity was inescapable. About Maine’s ever-bombastic governor, always quarrelsome with the press, including Chris, he once wrote, “I consider myself pretty lucky to have the opportunity to cover a governor who doesn’t tiptoe around all the time trying to please everyone.” Hundreds attended his funeral. Two weeks after his death, all 186 members of Maine’s legislature sponsored a “memorial sentiment” honoring Chris. The Senate president stepped down from the rostrum to talk about his own anguish at Chris’s death.

U.S. Sen. Susan Collins, a Republican, and Sen. Angus King, an Independent who caucuses with Democrats, praised Chris in a joint statement as a “consummate professional who embodied the best ideals of journalism.”

One of Nieman colleague James Scott’s fondest memories was the summer after our Nieman year. Chris invited James up for a weekend visit. Both loved fishing, so they went out to the beach, a cooler of beer and rods in hand. It was a glorious afternoon. They caught little more than a sunburn and a hangover, but had a ball, reflecting on the year we had enjoyed in Cambridge and looking ahead at the return to our newsrooms.

## NIEMAN NOTES

behind “The Weekly,” an upcoming TV news show, where she is involved in the writing, reporting, shooting, and editing. She has been with the Times since 2013.

**Mary Beth Sheridan** has a new role at The Washington Post, as a correspondent—based in Mexico City—covering Mexico and Central America. Most recently the Post’s deputy foreign editor, Sheridan has been at the newspaper since 2001 and previously covered Mexico and Latin America for the Miami Herald and the L.A. Times.

### 2014

**Anna Fifield** is the winner of the 2018 Shorenstein Journalism Award, which is given annually by Stanford University’s Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center to a journalist who has produced outstanding reporting on critical issues affecting Asia. Fifield has covered Korea and Japan for The Washington Post for the past four years. She is now the newspaper’s Beijing bureau chief, covering China.

**Tina Pamintuan** is the new general manager of San Francisco’s KALW radio station, a role which she assumed in September. Pamintuan is the founder of the audio journalism program at City University of New York’s Graduate School of Journalism, where she was also a faculty member for more than a decade.

### 2015

**David Jiménez** has joined The New York Times as a columnist, writing for the paper’s Spanish edition.

Jimenez was previously editor in chief of El Mundo in Spain.

**Maggie Koerth-Baker** is the recipient of a 2018 Kavli Science Journalism Award from the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). She won a gold award (\$5,000) in the online category for “The Complicated Legacy of a Panda Who Was Really Good at Sex,” her story for FiveThirtyEight about a panda that has fathered 120 of the 500-some pandas in captivity.

### 2016

**Wenxin Fan** is a member of The Wall Street Journal team that won a 2018 Gerald Loeb Award in the international category for “China’s Surveillance State.”

**An Xiao Mina** has penned a new book, “Memes to Movements: How the World’s Most Viral Media is Changing Social Protest and Power,” which was published by Beacon Press in January. It examines how internet memes are agents of not just pop culture, but of global politics, protest, and propaganda—both on- and off-line.

**Grzegorz Piechota** is the co-author, along with Harvard Business School professor Thales S. Teixeira, of “Unlocking the Customer Value Chain: How Decoupling Drives Consumer Disruption.” An exploration of the patterns of disruption in industries and of what startups must do to gain a competitive edge, the book was published by Currency/Penguin Random House in February.

**Tara Pixley** is now teaching as a tenure-track professor of journalism at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. An independent photojournalist and editor, Pixley has been a lecturer in

photojournalism and media studies at the University of California, San Diego and San Diego City College.

**Wendi Thomas** is one of the 14 local reporters and newsrooms that have been selected to participate in the second year of ProPublica’s Local Reporting Network, which supports investigative journalism at local and regional news organizations. Thomas’s Memphis-based project, “MLK50: Justice Through Journalism” will be supported with ProPublica’s expertise and collaboration with senior reporters, and through reimbursements for a year’s salary and benefits for each of the participating reporters.

**Christine Willmsen** has joined WBUR, Boston’s NPR station, where she will be creating and leading a new investigative reporting team. Previously, she was an investigative reporter at The Seattle Times.

### 2017

**Trushar Barot** has joined Facebook to lead and develop the social network’s Integrity Initiatives in India, a role that includes working to fight fake news and digital information, developing digital literacy training programs, and more. Barot has worked at the BBC in various digital roles for the past 17 years.

**Jane Elizabeth** has joined The (Raleigh) News & Observer and The (Durham) Herald Sun as managing editor, a position she assumed in August. Most recently, she was director of accountability journalism at the American Press Institute.

**Jeneé Osterheldt** has joined The Boston Globe as a culture writer covering identity and social justice. She previously worked as a columnist at The Kansas City Star.

**Karin Pettersson** is the co-author of “Internet är Trasigt: Silicon Valley och Demokratins Kris” (“The Internet is Broken: Silicon Valley and the Crisis of Democracy”) published in Sweden by Natur and Kultur. The book has been nominated for the August Prize, Sweden’s national book award.

**Jason Rezaian** is the author of “Prisoner,” a memoir of the 544 days he was held in an Iranian prison, published by HarperCollins in January. He worked for The Washington Post at the time and still does.

**Marcela Turati**, recognized for her coverage of human rights and drug violence in Mexico, is the recipient of the Fleischaker/Greene Award for Courageous International Reporting. The award is given by Western Kentucky University’s Fleischaker/Greene Fund for Excellence in First Amendment Issues.

### 2018

**Tristan Ahtone** is the newly-elected president of the Native American Journalists Association (NAJA) Board. Ahtone, a member of the Kiowa Tribe of Oklahoma, is associate editor for tribal affairs at High Country News.

**Nneka Nwosu Faison** is the new managing editor of WCVB-TV’s newsmagazine show “Chronicle.” She has worked as a producer and reporter at the Boston station since 2013.

**Lisa Lerer** has joined The New York Times as a national politics reporter. In her new position, which she started in August, Lerer—a former Associated Press reporter who covered the 2016 presidential election—writes the Times’s Politics newsletter. Lerer also, in November, joined CNN as a political analyst.

**Diana Marcum** is the author of “The Tenth Island: Finding Joy, Beauty, and Unexpected Love in the Azores,” a memoir that takes place on the Azores islands in the Atlantic. It was published by Little A in August.

**Frederik Obermaier** is among the journalists recognized with a 2017 IRE Gannett Award for Innovation in Watchdog Journalism for the “Paradise Papers: Secrets of the Global Elite” investigation. The award was given to the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, Süddeutsche Zeitung, The New York Times, The Guardian, and 90-plus

media partners. Obermaier was one of two Süddeutsche Zeitung journalists who received the leaked documents on which the investigation is based.

**João Pina**’s photography book, “46750,” a visual account of Rio de Janeiro in the decade leading up to the 2016 Olympics, was published in March. The title refers to the number of homicides that occurred in the city between 2007 and 2016, a period in which violent crime surged while Brazil made huge investments in sports infrastructure rather than public services.

**Maria Ramirez** was a Pritzker Fellow at the University of Chicago Institute of Politics for the fall semester. Ramirez, co-founder of Politibot, studied and compared efforts in the U.S. and in Europe to fight polarization, nationalism, and distrust in media. In December, she started working as a strategy director for eldiario.es, an online newspaper in Spain.

**Mat Skene** has joined The New York Times as a member of the team behind “The Weekly,” an upcoming TV news show. He is the show’s executive producer. Skene previously worked at

Al Jazeera, where he created and oversaw the show “Fault Lines.”

**Lauren N. Williams** has joined The Atlantic as a senior editor on the Culture desk. Previously, Williams had been a features editor at Essence since 2014.

**Edward Wong** has assumed the position of diplomatic correspondent for The New York Times, reporting on foreign policy from Washington, D.C. Previously, he was an international correspondent for the paper, serving as Beijing bureau chief from 2008-2016.

## 2019 Knight Visiting Nieman Fellows Named



**Sarah Baird**, founder of Shoeleather, a directory of local reporters, will explore how to build a toolkit that will serve freelancers working outside of traditional media centers.



**Kabir Chibber**, most recently the business editor at Quartz, will research the sustainability of specialized email subscriptions as a driving force for readership and revenue in journalism.



**Colette Guldimmann**, English lecturer at the University of Pretoria, will reconceptualize the legacy of South African investigative journalist Henry Nxumalo under apartheid, analyzing his U.S. work.



**Karima Haynes**, assistant professor at Bowie State University, will develop a curriculum for high school journalists that focuses on cyberbullying as a media literacy issue.



**Heather Hendershot**, a media professor at MIT, will examine TV coverage of the 1968 Chicago Democratic National Convention to explore what lessons can be learned and applied to contemporary news.



**Emre Kizilkaya**, executive editor of Hürriyet Daily News, will develop a platform for sustainable independent journalism in Turkey where local communities select and fund stories.



**Taylor Lorenz**, a staff writer at The Atlantic, will study how members of Generation Z create, consume, and distribute news on Instagram, including a survey of Instagram-native news accounts.



**P.E. Moskowitz**, co-founder of Study Hall, a media newsletter and online support platform for media workers, will research media labor relations and how digital communities can grow sustainably.



**John D. Sutter**, a senior investigative reporter for CNN, will explore how journalists can better tell multi-generational stories, particularly those involving climate change.

The Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard will host a group of nine reporters, editors, media entrepreneurs, and academics as Knight Visiting Nieman Fellows during the 2019 calendar year. Each will spend time at Harvard University to work on a project designed to advance journalism in some innovative way.

Announcing the new fellows, Nieman Foundation curator Ann Marie Lipinski said: “We’re excited about this group and look forward to learning from them and working with them to advance their ideas. The visiting fellows have been a great addition to our academic-year fellowship and continue to enrich journalism through their innovative projects.”

## People Want to Know About People

### Environment journalism fails when we forget about people

BY SIPHO KINGS

IT'S ODD THAT we forget people in our reporting. People want to know about people; gossip and curiosity are some of our default settings. Yet we keep publishing stuff that is devoid of humans. I do it. I imagine you've done it, be that in the form of journalism or an annual report.

This is a particular problem in my beat as an environment reporter. It means we quite literally talk about the end of the world but get little in response. In a bid to fix this, I've written this thing to talk through my process and why I think basing reporting around actual people is so important.

I'll go chronologically.

I grew up in the sort of communities that we rarely cover. Places one petrol tank too far away from the big city for media to get to. In Southern Africa—my home—this means most everywhere gets left out of the narrative of how things are unfolding this century.

My family didn't have television. The BBC's World Service was our daily news. In eSwatini—the speck of a kingdom that you might know as Swaziland—and in Botswana, our luxury would be buying the weekly paper.

I didn't read these. They were boring and my focus was on the important stuff of childhood: tasting soil and breaking bones. Family pictures taken from dad's ever-present Nikon from the early '90s capture an image of someone perpetually naked and outside.

In writing my own narrative, one day, I will label this as the roots of my environment reporting.

Life at this stage was spent in the community, in the villages of Bokaa and Pitsane in Botswana. In that part of my continent, the



**My focus in reporting is getting to communities that do not find themselves represented in the media**



philosophy of *ubuntu* guides how we relate to people. It holds that we are who we are because of others. The giddy grasping at me-centered American capitalism is destroying this, but at that point it meant kids wandered around, congregating at whichever house had the best grub.

Kids were to be seen and heard. This meant I went with my parents on projects (they worked with communities to develop things such as water projects). The *with* here is important. Much Western aid fails because it is imposed. Well-meaning people with funding decide what communities need, but don't listen to what the community wants.

My parents listened. My first two decades therefore cemented this idea that you listen to people and hear what their take on things is. It also meant I played with the washers and spanners of development, seeing cement cast and boreholes drilled.

In environment journalism, we refer to this intersection of people and their environment as brown issues. That is to make some sort of distinction that there is a realm of environment where people are not involved. We talk about green issues when referring to the natural world and other species.

In South Africa—where I went to university to study journalism—brown issues are

all-important. The apartheid government forced non-white people to live in areas where the environment was broken and could not carry so many people. Extractive capitalism replaced this model when free elections saw a transition in 1994, with little change for many people.

People born into this “free” South Africa still live downwind of factories that splutter sulphur over their communities, and power plants that ensure they have chronic asthma.

Environment journalism all-too-often fails to show this reality. Too many of us are based in cities, are white and middle class. We gravitate toward environmentalists because they want to make the world a better place. We report what we know.

At the same time, newsrooms are cutting full-time beat reporters. At this point there are maybe a handful in secure positions in South Africa. A handful for a big country with nearly 60 million people and a future rendered very uncertain by the changing climate. That means stories fall to overwhelmed general reporters, who take press releases from environmental organizations and re-write them as news. Those organizations get their funding—and direction—from Western donors, who care most about green issues.

This ends up being a journalism about issues, events, and other news hooks. The most obvious example of this is the continued slaughter of rhino for their horn, with 1,000 killed a year. This dominates reporting. Middle-class readers want to know more so the media provides for this small segment of the population that pays for journalism. Other issues get crowded out.

In 2011—after a year interning at the Mail & Guardian—my editor asked me to help change this, by taking up the position as the paper's environment reporter. My focus would be on getting to communities that are out of the way and do not find themselves represented in the media.

Thanks to my childhood, I threw myself into this. Stories would be about people and their lives. In each case, this could then link to a wider issue. So a village choking thanks to a power plant would be a way to talk about local air pollution and the carbon emissions that drive global warming.

Many other environment reporters follow a similar route. But our industry could use more. This is why stories about global warming, floods, and all forms of catastrophe struggle to resonate. This is why it feels like we're shouting into a void. ■

*Siphon Kings, a 2018 Nieman Fellow, covers the environment for the Mail & Guardian*

OPPOSITE: LISA ABITBOL

## Nieman Online



Nobel Peace Prize winner and former president of Colombia Juan Manuel Santos, NF '88, speaks with Colombian documentarian Margarita Martinez, NF '09, during a talk at the Nieman Foundation's 80th anniversary reunion weekend. Watch the video at [nieman.harvard.edu/80th-anniversary-reunion-weekend/](http://nieman.harvard.edu/80th-anniversary-reunion-weekend/)

**“There is a process of polarization in almost every country in the world. The big challenge today is to see if we can ... again reenergize the center. Reenergize a more pragmatic type of politics.”**

Juan Manuel Santos, NF '88  
Nobel Peace Prize laureate

## NiemanReports

### Dialogue Journalism

Can so-called “dialogue journalism” engage audiences, foster civil discourse, and increase trust in the media? Ricki Morell takes a look at the increasing number of conversation-based journalism projects that bring together diverse audiences.

### “...Go to War I Did, and at Considerable Trouble”

Ruth Cowan fought both generals and editors to become one of the first women credentialed to cover WWII. María Ramirez, the 2018 Ruth Cowan Nash Nieman Fellow, reflects on the Associated Press correspondent and her career.

## NiemanLab

### How to Successfully Pitch The New York Times (or, well, anyone else)

New York Times Smarter Living section editor Tim Herrera presents a list of the six most common mistakes freelancers make when pitching, and also includes tips on how to impress editors.

### What Happens When Facebook Goes Down? People Read the News

Would more people go directly to news sites and apps for their information fix if Facebook didn't exist? Web analytics tracker Chartbeat has evidence that suggests yes. Josh Schwartz writes about Chartbeat's glimpses into consumer behavior and changes the company is seeing in content discovery that is good news for publishers.

## NiemanStoryboard

### Mic Drop? A Veteran Longform Writer Trades Notebook for Headphones, Text with Sound

Longtime print journalist Cynthia Gorney takes on a new challenge—her first narrative podcast, “Curb Cuts” for 99% Indivisible—and shares her frustrations and successes with audio gear, interviews, and edits.

### Annotation: “Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf Scientist?”

Freelancer Christopher Solomon discusses and annotates his July 2018 New York Times Magazine piece, which centers on controversial wildlife biologist Rob Wielgus and a contentious issue in the American West: gray wolves and their protection under the Endangered Species Act.

# NiemanReports

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TO PROMOTE AND  
ELEVATE THE STANDARDS  
OF JOURNALISM

