

NIEMAN REPORTS

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WHAT'S NEXT...

FOR JOURNALISM'S
POST-TRUMP CHALLENGES

FOR REPORTING ON
THE BIDEN WHITE HOUSE

FOR THE POLITICAL
WEAPONIZATION OF "FAKE NEWS"



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President Donald Trump walks off stage after delivering remarks during the Faith and Freedom Coalition conference in 2016

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A man in Krakow, Poland protests political repression in Belarus in July 2020

Front Cover: President Trump, in 2018, leaves the White House after talking to members of the media

Back Cover: Joe Biden arrives at a campaign event in Delaware in July 2020

Documenting the Lies, Righting the Record

Journalism is adopting a more robust rhetoric in response to the amplification of Trump's demagoguery by social media and cable news

BY ANN MARIE LIPINSKI

I traveled once to Tripoli to interview Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi. Colleagues and I met him in a Bedouin tent under a full moon on the grounds of Bab al-Azizya, his walled barracks.

He was a man who both courted and spurned the West; as our story later recounted, he offered us “sweet tea and a bitter critique of U.S. foreign policy.”

Gadhafi was a rogue force on the world stage, denying Libya's terrorist activities and dismissive of his country's role in the ghastly Pan Am bombing over Lockerbie, Scotland that killed 270 in 1988. “Something of the past,” he said, bored. The year was 2000 and what really interested him was the emerging power of the internet and how he might use it to reach a U.S. audience.

Gadhafi grinned. “I hope that I will find a forum to talk to the Americans so that I can brainwash them for their own interests.” Before parting, we were asked if we would grant him a direct pipeline to the readers of our newspaper, the Chicago Tribune, through regular postings on our website.

We would not. But it turns out Gadhafi, who in 2011 would meet a vengeful end at the hands of fellow Libyans, was merely anticipating a new era in political communication: easy, unchecked access to American eyes and ears, the tedium of interviews with fact-checking journalists overcome.

Whatever brainwashing forum he imagined in the U.S., we have likely overperformed. Complicit social media and cable news forces helped Donald Trump ascend to the presidency through

near-frictionless use of their platforms. In turn, his prolific use of them has created one of the most deceitful records in American political history, inconclusively footnoted as disputed.

Trump: “MOST CORRUPT ELECTION IN U.S. HISTORY!”
Twitter: “This claim about election fraud is disputed”

When it's working, journalism — the journalism of verification — has traditions and tools that conclusively right the record. “Never deceive the audience,” Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel state plainly in their essential book, “The Elements of Journalism.” Yes, the industry struggled with this during Trump's winning campaign and early presidency and we have written extensively about those failings, including in this issue. But earlier stenographic habits have been replaced by a new rhetoric.

“Increasingly detached from reality, President Donald Trump stood before a White House lectern and delivered a 46-minute diatribe against the election results that produced a win for Democrat

“**One of the most deceitful records in U.S. political history is inconclusively footnoted as disputed**”

Joe Biden, unspooling one misstatement after another to back his baseless claim that he really won.”

That is the unflinching lede on the AP news account of a December 2 speech about the “rigged” election that Trump gave from the White House (a speech CNN refused to air, calling it a “propaganda video”). It was as revealing about the coverage changes in mainstream media as the following sentence was about social media as a haven for the president's disinformation campaigns: “Trump called his address, *released Wednesday only on social media and delivered in front of no audience*, perhaps ‘the most important speech’ of his presidency.” (Italics mine.)

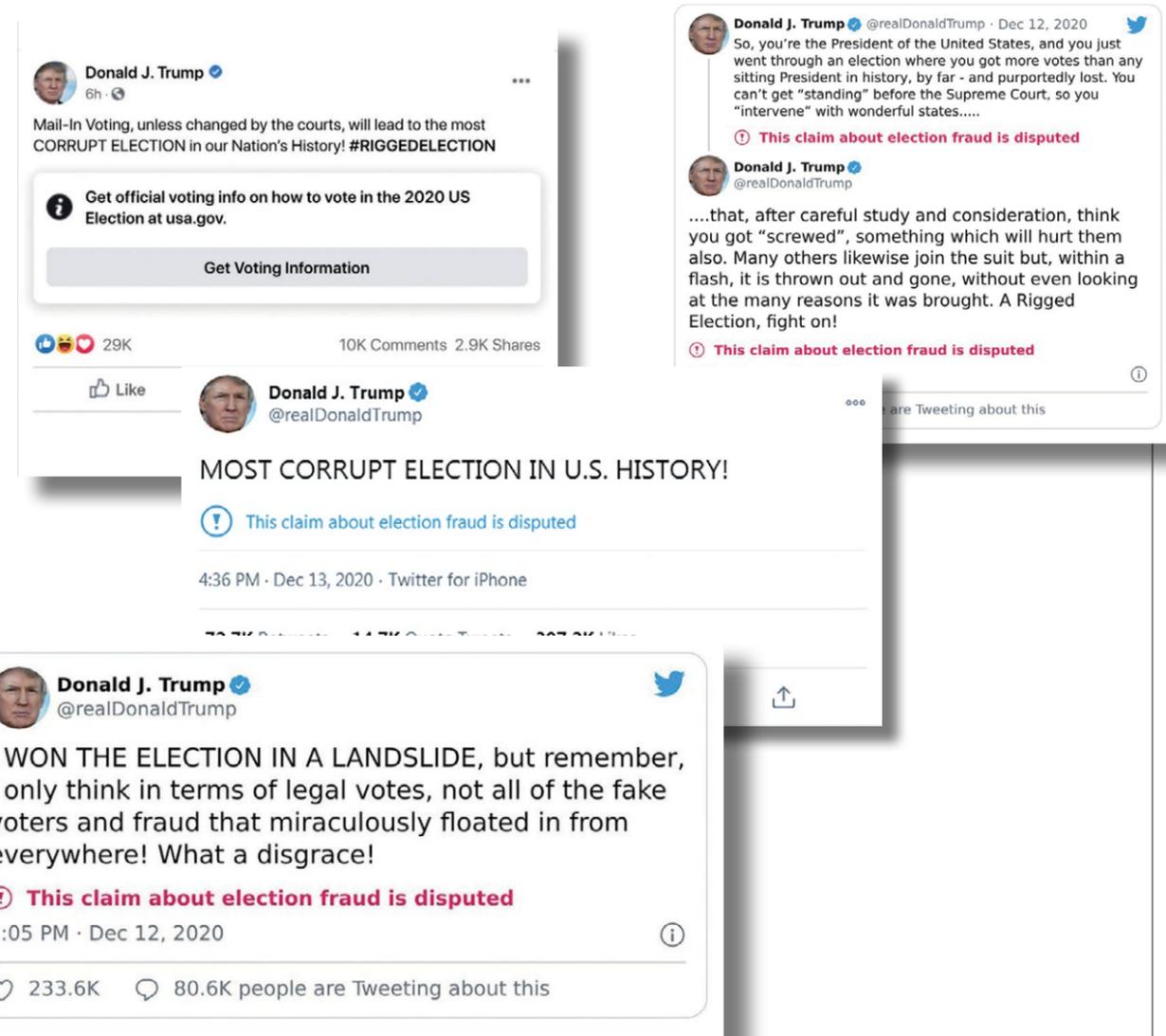
Over @realDonaldTrump, his more than 88 million followers were offered a two-minute version of the speech, which Twitter labeled “disputed.” On his Facebook page, Trump's 34 million followers could find the full speech, eventually with a flag reminding us that voter fraud was rare and Biden the projected winner. The AP reported that, about an hour after it was posted, the video had been shared by more than 60,000 Facebook users and viewed “hundreds of thousands of times.” A week later, it had been shared by more than 345,000 and viewed 14 million times.

Looking at the platforms' blue rebukes — so quiet aside the president's thundering demagoguery — I couldn't help but think that Trump was living Gadhafi's dream of the idealized political forum.

Emily Bell, a Columbia University journalism professor and leading voice on technology and news, tweeted a photo of the Facebook post before it had been flagged and called for journalism and academic institutions to return any Facebook funds they've received “until the company implemented its own policies.” She added, “If you are taking money from Facebook for any purpose aimed at ‘improving the information ecosystem’ and you are not publicly protesting this farcical situation then you are making matters worse.”

When I messaged her to ask what Facebook and Twitter should do, she argued that due to the Georgia Senate races we remained in an election period and the platforms' own policies to curb election disinformation should be enforced. She advocated suspending Trump's Twitter account until the inauguration “given the volume of disinfo on it,” and suspending or removing

@REALDONALDTRUMP/TWITTER, DONALD J. TRUMP/FACEBOOK



The power of social media as a political forum was on full display when Twitter and Facebook did little to curb President Trump's posts claiming the election was corrupt

Trump's Facebook account. “If they make rules around elections then they should apply them — particularly to the more influential actors.”

Meanwhile, documenting the cascading trail of lies has been left to traditional media and their overworked fact checkers. The Washington Post's Fact Checker project, now a bulging database of presidential deceptions, catalogued 23,035 false or misleading claims made by Trump between his election and September 11. In August alone, as election season was entering the homestretch, the Post tallied an average of more than 50 falsehoods a day. “It's only gotten worse — so much so that the Fact Checker team cannot keep up,” they conceded. Noting

they were weeks behind in updating the collection — the Post fact-checkers weren't able to check all those August claims and add them to the database until October — they asked for our forbearance: “We maintain this database mostly in our spare time, in addition to our day jobs.”

The bigger toll, of course, is on the nation, eroded with each spurious claim. And having witnessed President Trump's social media abuses, only the naive could imagine a disciplined Citizen Trump. Both Facebook and Twitter exempted him from certain sanctions because of his political status, sanctions they could enforce when he leaves office (Twitter has explicitly said that it will) — or not

if he declares he is running again.

But focusing on whether his accounts will be suspended or banned is ultimately a distraction, the well of social discourse so poisoned and the polluters so many. Maria Ressa — the courageous Filipino journalist who has been targeted and threatened through Facebook mobs linked to President Rodrigo Duterte and who is now being prosecuted for her journalism — reminds us the problem transcends Trump.

“American technology giants created the platforms that enabled manipulation at a mass scale,” she wrote, “structurally designed to undermine democracies by playing to our worst selves.”

If we don't demand better, we are all accomplices. ■

Errin Haines on Shaping a News Organization: “We’re Building Culture Instead of Trying to Fix It”

The editor-at-large for The 19th* on Breonna Taylor, covering race, and more

Errin Haines is editor-at-large for The 19th*, a nonprofit news outlet covering the intersection of women, politics, and policy. Launched officially in August, the nonpartisan newsroom is named after the 19th Amendment, which granted white women in America the right to vote; its logo includes an asterisk to recognize those who were excluded from accessing the ballot and those who continue to struggle to do so.

Before joining The 19th* as a founding member, Haines was the national writer on race and ethnicity for The Associated Press. An MSNBC contributor, Haines helped bring national attention to the Breonna Taylor case when she spoke to Taylor’s family and The 19th* ran the story back in May. Haines discussed this and more during a talk with Nieman Fellows in the fall. Edited excerpts:

On why she joined The 19th*

Errin Haines: A year and a half ago, I was on the primary campaign trail and was frustrated about the way that gender and race were being discussed. It felt like we hadn’t learned that much from 2016 in terms of the narratives that we were using to frame the stakes of this election and who and where we were as a country. My now boss, Emily Ramshaw, reached out to me out of the blue.

She told me her vision for wanting to start this newsroom. While I initially thought it was a great idea, I was like, “Get back to me when you have some money.” She took that as a challenge, raised the money, and was like, “OK, come on. Let’s go do this.”

What ultimately ended up with me making the decision to leave AP and start this new thing was that I didn’t feel like the issues that were inherent in political journalism coverage were going to be fixed

fast enough and structurally by staying there. I felt like the only way to fix that was to start over. So that’s what we did.

On the asterisk in The 19th* logo and how it guides coverage

The 19th* launched in the centennial year of suffrage, which we were certainly marking but with that asterisk. We knew when we were starting this newsroom that Emily wanted to call it The 19th. She also did have some trepidation about that because she understood that not all women got access to the ballot when the 19th Amendment was passed.

I said, “Well, let’s call it The 19th but put an asterisk on it in recognition of the Black women who, frankly, were sacrificed so that the white women could get the right to vote at their expense.” That’s what we did. The asterisk has become a North Star for us in terms of thinking about coverage, in terms of thinking about who is not being seen and heard in this democracy and wanting to bring them into that conversation.

What I’ve heard over and over again is that there are too many people who want to engage in this conversation who feel excluded or who don’t feel welcome to do that in their communities because of how divisive things are now. What we say is that



Women are the majority of the electorate. We shouldn’t be talked about like a special interest group

we try to be a home for all people, even if they don’t want to necessarily live here. That’s across the political spectrum. That’s people who are voting, people who aren’t. We want them to feel empowered so that they can get engaged in this democracy.

We believe that all issues are women’s issues and also that we are the majority of the electorate. We shouldn’t be talked about like a special interest group anymore. That is what we have been trying mightily to do.

The pandemic, frankly, gave us another lane of coverage to expose inequality specifically around women, communities of color, other marginalized folks.

On bringing national attention to the Breonna Taylor case

The Breonna Taylor case came up around the same time as Ahmaud Arbery’s case. The hashtag #runningwithahmaud was getting a lot of attention. Ben Crump, [an American attorney specializing in civil rights cases], reached out to me and said, “Look, there’s another case that is pretty egregious that is getting hardly any attention, and I need your help.”

He tells me about Breonna Taylor, which was a horrific story. Then he tells me that she was killed in March. By the time that he and I are talking, it’s May. I’m like, “Well, how has it been two months, and nobody really has heard about this, and especially given that she was an essential worker?” He’s like, “Well, yeah, nobody’s really written about this nationally. And her mom and her sister are frustrated by this and they want to talk. And I think they should talk to you.”

I immediately was like, “Absolutely. Yeah, we’re doing this because her story needs to be out here.” I will say that my bosses did not immediately get that this was a story for The 19th*. Again, using the vehicle of the asterisk — if we say, “What is the asterisk here?” That’s like, “Why is this a 19th story?” The asterisk, for me, was that gender was one of the main explanations for why her case had not gotten more attention. Yes, there was no bodycam footage or video of what had happened; videos tend to get more attention because there’s more proof for people that these kinds of things happened. But it felt like the fact that she was a Black woman was part of why people didn’t know about that case. I wanted to put it out there, which is exactly what we did. As a result, she becomes a hashtag and people start paying attention.

LAURA SKELDING



Errin Haines: Whiteness “needs to be interrogated in this moment”

Everything else that flowed from writing the first national story about that case and putting it on people’s radar, getting it trending, felt important and definitely in line with our mission.

On covering race

Even before I was the national race writer at AP, because it is my belief that race is the unfinished business of this democracy and the central story of America and the most important beat in journalism because it touches everything, I was not ever somebody who felt pigeonholed by this coverage or that it was going to hold me back in my career in some way.

Even now, as a political journalist, I feel like it is easier to learn how to cover politics than it is to cover race. You can see that in political coverage. Most of these people don’t have any idea what they are looking at when they are looking at issues of race when they appear in politics as they frequently do. It is the story of our time.

I have never backed down from that.

Writing about Black folks and writing about them in their totality, not just tragedy or showing up when there was something wrong but covering every aspect of Black life and putting those stories on the front page of that newspaper told me that our stories were valid, that they mattered, and that I didn’t need to explain to somebody why they should be done. I’ve carried that with me throughout my career.

On practicing diversity, equity, and inclusion

We have known for a long time what the prescriptions are for improving diversity in coverage and in newsrooms. The Kerner Commission report laid it all out and we need to pick that document back up, dust it off, and do what it says. That is where I would start.

The key is being intentional. I think, for example, what the L.A. Times has been doing is remarkable. They seem to be taking this very seriously. The new

Washington bureau chief is now a Black woman — which feels very important — Kimbriell Kelly. They just published this huge race series where they’re confronting their own past coverage and approach to this work and also their newsroom culture. That is a very important step. I do also think that newsrooms have to recognize that this is a journey.

I don’t want folks to get racism fatigue and say, “Oh, well, you know, we did three months. I’m tired. This is hard. I don’t wanna keep going. I just want to move on from this.” If you’re going to address this, [acknowledge that] we are all at the beginning of this process. It’s not just, “Oh, man, last summer was rough. Phew, glad we don’t have to deal with that anymore.”

No, this is ongoing work and an ongoing commitment. Getting honest about and being in conversation with marginalized folks within your newsroom is very important. If you don’t have a whole lot of them, you should ask yourself why you don’t have a whole lot of them. What are you going to do about it?

That doesn’t necessarily mean firing a whole bunch of white men. It means, “Hey, look, we’re going to commit to hiring a more diverse staff. We are going to add people and the people that we add are going to be more diverse and reflective of where we are as a country.” That’s the challenge.

I keep saying this: “Don’t forget that whiteness is an identity that needs to be interrogated in this moment.” We need to be asking ourselves, what does it mean to be a white person in America right now and talk to people about that.

On reaching all women

Something that we are committed to at The 19th* is trying to be that audience for all women. For us, that includes conservative women, who we believe are trying to engage in good faith around conversations about this democracy.

There are some people who are on the extremes in either direction that we’re just not going to reach. It doesn’t matter how many stories we write or how many different people we try to include. Those people are not persuadable. We recognize that.

What we do believe and are being very earnest about is trying to reach the folks who are not at the ends of those spectrums. We feel like it’s what’s missing, not just in our democracy but in our journalism. ■

Creating a Podcast About a Challenge That Will Outlast the Pandemic: Climate Change

With the new CBC podcast “What on Earth,” **Laura Lynch**, NF ’00, is bringing climate change coverage — and solutions — to Canadians

The phone call came in May. The Canadian Broadcasting bosses in Toronto wanted me to follow through on a radio program proposal I pitched them back in January. I was taken aback. Having produced a pilot in February and having heard nothing, I knew news about the pandemic had obliterated almost all other current affairs programming.

Yet here it was: The chance I sought to create, produce, and host a network program dedicated to examining all aspects of climate change. There was just one catch: The show had to be up and running within six weeks. Despite the tight timeline and the fact that zero producers had been hired, it took just seconds for me to say yes.

I have faced challenges in my career, especially as a foreign correspondent dealing with hostile government officials, dangerous conflict areas, and men who thought female



Engineer **Matthias Wolfsohn** (left) and senior producer **Manusha Janakiram** working on CBC’s “What On Earth” podcast

correspondents had little value. I thought embarking on this new project would be a breeze compared to all that.

And in some ways, it has been. “What on Earth” aired its first episode on July 4, focused on the pandemic and climate change. Those first weeks were a blur, ramping up a weekly program in record time, but we were eager to shape a summer series worth remembering. We looked at how Indigenous people can help shape a response to a changing climate, how nature is on the move as the planet warms, the growing threat of floods, and how to put decarbonization into practice, among other topics. Each week we promised our listeners that we would not only present a problem or a challenge, but we would scrutinize potential solutions. And we broadened our scope beyond science. We looked at climate

change through the lens of the arts and considered other topics often not covered on the beat.

We did this all amidst the new challenges posed by the pandemic. Unable to congregate in person to plan shows, to invite guests into studios, or to quickly head out to record in the field, we adjusted on the fly, found new technology, and embraced all it had to offer — dealing with many technical hiccups along the way.

Then, with just about two episodes left to go, another call came. The show was being extended until the end of 2020, and perhaps even longer. So here we are, planning and airing more episodes, allowing Canadian listeners a chance to hear something new or different about climate change — the challenge we all face, and one that will outlast the pandemic. ■

Building a “Platform for Change” At Germany’s The New Institute, **Georg Diez**, NF ’17, hopes storytelling is the catalyst for societal change

What is the power, urgency, some would say duty of journalism in the face of the crises the world is facing today, starting with the climate, in-

equality, and democratic decay?

I have no clear answers, but I have the opportunity to come up with texts, videos, podcasts, and films to make the case that employing journalistic

methods of research and storytelling in the context of a meaningful goal is indeed journalism for our times.

In 2019 I left Der Spiegel, where I had been working for 10 years, to join and help build The New Institute, a “platform for change,” as we call it. This philanthropically supported Hamburg-based enterprise combines academic rigor and an activist mission to further the transformation of societies.

The New Institute is an Institute of

LAURA LYNCH

Adding Diverse Perspectives to Newsroom Discussions

With their Diversifying Journalism project, **Ana Campoy**, NF ’20 — along with **Jasmine Brown** and **Selymar Colón** — is building databases of journalists and experts of color

At the time I was looking for my first job, newsrooms were trying to become more diverse for a practical reason: to cover communities of color. I remember recruiters getting excited when I told them I spoke Spanish; they were looking for people like me to report on the Latinx community.

The problem with that approach is that it siloes communities of color — and the reporters covering them — instead of incorporating them into overall coverage.

More recently, journalists have been talking about newsroom diversity as a moral and ethical imperative. I agree, but my concern is that hiring reporters of color for the sake of doing the right thing alone can devolve into a box-checking exercise. It can also make people of color feel tokenized.

In both cases, what can end up driving the hires is skin color or ethnic background. And such strategies hardly seem to be effective, given people of color

Advanced Study that is inviting fellows from academia, the arts, activism, government, media, and business to collaborate to find solutions to some of the most pressing problems we face. The broader goal is to find a narrative for a just and sustainable ecological, economic, and democratic transformation.

Storytelling, I believe, is essential to move people, on an individual as well as on a societal level. The climate crisis, capitalism, and democracy are



2020 Nieman Fellows (from left) **Jasmine Brown**, **Selymar Colón**, and **Ana Campoy** teamed up to launch **Diversifying Journalism**, or **DiJo**

are still vastly underrepresented in the news.

My Nieman fellowship got me thinking about what could be a better model. During my year at Lippmann House, I got a glimpse at how diversity can be organic and authentic. My class of fellows is the most diverse group of journalists I’ve ever worked with in terms of race, ethnicity, nationality, interests, and expertise.

During the year we spent together, our differences made our discussions richer, more nuanced, and, yes, more complicated. It was like peeking through a kaleidoscope that constantly shifted my perspective, making me reflect on my bias.

Of course, the diversity of a Nieman class is also engineered. The program’s curators specifically pick fellows with backgrounds they believe can complement and challenge each other. But why can’t newsrooms do that, too?

In the months since I left Harvard, I’ve been working with my fellow fellows **Jasmine Brown** and **Selymar Colón** on a project that we hope will help news organizations recreate the kind of diversity we experienced at the Nieman Foundation. We’re calling it **Diversifying Journalism**, or **DiJo** (which means “said” in Spanish.)

Our goal is to add more perspectives

all very material fields where reform is needed. With each, there are underlying narratives that determine very often the kind of policies proposed and actions taken. Change cannot be reduced to storytelling, but storytelling is very often at the beginning of change.

What we are trying at The New Institute, as a journalistic enterprise, is to fill the void in the middle of the triangle of academia, politics, and media with meaningful and coherent content that

to the discussions that drive coverage in newsrooms, which we believe would result in better journalism. We also want the public to get that diversity of views through the sources included in stories.

As journalists, we know that under the pressure of a deadline it’s easier to turn to our go-to contacts for a quote. So, we’re creating a crowdsourced database of experts of color that reporters in a rush can quickly consult. We’re inviting doctors, economists, business executives, lawyers — essentially sources in all fields — to submit their names.

We’re building another database for newsroom staff of color. This one, too, will include details about each person’s expertise and background. We’re hoping it will serve as a hiring tool for managers, and spur networking and mentorship among the journalists who join it.

After months of planning, the project is coming together. A few weeks ago, we launched online surveys to crowdsource the databases. We’ve hired a researcher, and we’ve created a logo and a website.

Though we’re no longer at Lippmann, I see DiJo as an extension of our fellowship. It’s helping us learn new skills — and ensuring that we continue brainstorming about how to improve journalism. ■

supports a hybrid form of change-making and classical journalism. This effort seeks to find pathways to fundamentally reconfigure societies.

I am learning every day, and I have come to understand that one of the deficits of the kind of journalism that I had been doing is the lack of openness, of community, and a sense of purpose. Too often, the work is too reactive, not constructive or even informative in a larger sense. How can we change that? ■



CENTERING WOMEN IN ABORTION COVERAGE

Journalists must
cover abortion as
a women's
health issue,
not just a
political issue

BY MELISSA JELTSSEN

F

OR ABOUT A YEAR, Becca Andrews, a Mother Jones

reporter based in California, diligently worked to build a relationship with Laurie Bertram Roberts, an activist who helps Mississippi women obtain abortions, often shepherding them across state lines for care. The two women regularly spoke on background, and over time, Andrews became well versed in the obstacles to accessing abortion in Mississippi, a state considered one of the most difficult in the nation to legally terminate a pregnancy.

Andrews wanted to document the emotional, physical, and financial toll a woman seeking an abortion in the South faces, and her ultimate goal was to do a ride-along with such a patient as she went for the procedure. To accomplish this goal, Andrews needed the activists on the ground to trust her. Roberts, she hoped, could connect her to a woman willing to share her story as it was unfolding. But there were significant ethical issues to consider: As head of the Mississippi Reproductive Freedom Fund, Roberts provided logistical and financial help to women seeking abortions. That put her in a position of power over them at a critical juncture in their lives.

If Roberts asked one of her clients if they were open to speaking to a reporter, they might feel implicit pressure to comply, or wonder if their funding was contingent on their participation, even if Roberts stressed that it was completely optional. Andrews and Roberts were at an impasse.

One day, during another conversation, Andrews offered a potential solution. What if one of Roberts' clients explicitly asked how they could help spread awareness and support her work? In that case, could Roberts pass along her phone number? The next morning, the reporter got a text: A young Mississippi woman who was about to travel to Arkansas for an abortion was eager to talk. If Andrews could make it to Little Rock the following day, she could follow the woman as she went through the process of obtaining an abortion and traveled back home.

The resulting article, "When Choice is 221 Miles Away: The Nightmare of Getting an Abortion in the South," was published in September 2019. It follows a recent college graduate, given the pseudonym Kate, and documents her three-month struggle to get an abortion. Ultimately, it took her three separate trips to an abortion clinic 200 miles from her home before she was able to end her pregnancy.

Andrews' Mother Jones story, which centers the lived experience of a woman trying to terminate an unwanted pregnancy and illustrates the impact of burdensome state regulations on abortion, is an anomaly in the world of abortion coverage. Despite the fact that abortion is common as nearly one in four women in the U.S. opt to have one in their lifetime, overwhelmingly safe, according to a landmark study by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, and, according to a Pew poll, the majority of the U.S. public believe it should remain legal in all or most cases, abortion is predominantly treated by the media as a political issue, not as an everyday women's health issue.

The failure to cover abortion through the lens of health care is particularly acute now, in the midst of a historic pandemic. As the coronavirus crisis enveloped the country, officials in 12 states made attempts to limit abortion access, arguing that abortion should not be categorized as an essential health care procedure. Abortion rights are also in jeopardy of being rolled back by an increasingly conservative Supreme Court. Readers deserve honest, thorough coverage of abortion and the role it plays in women's lives.

Instead, what audiences so often get are superficial political news stories about the latest bill to regulate

abortion, without context about the cumulative effect of years of such legislation. Readers are left without signposts to understand what is happening or why it matters. And more often than not, the people most affected by abortion access end up invisible in these stories.

Complicating matters, there is timidity among some media outlets when covering abortion, and a sense that "both sides" of the abortion debate must be given airtime. Editors — wary of the appearance of bias — may require reporters to present opposing viewpoints as equal even if the evidence does not support such framing. This is particularly pernicious in abortion coverage, as anti-abortion activists often offer false information and use misleading terms that can confuse readers if not properly contextualized. The desire for neutrality means news organizations end up amplifying dishonest sources, while those who are most marginalized by the issue remain silent.

"Most media organizations aren't really covering abortion well," says Kelly McBride, chair of the Craig Newmark Center for Ethics and Leadership at the Poynter Institute. "It takes a fair amount of knowledge to do any sort of reporting that is insightful. You have to have a pretty evolved interviewing skill set. You have

to have your craft down where you can put a story together in a compelling way. That requires some sophisticated editing as well."

To be fair, it is hardly surprising that the majority of abortion coverage focuses on politics. In the past few years, state lawmakers have passed an unprecedented wave of anti-abortion legislation, ranging from bans on the procedure to regulations imposing additional obstacles on patients and clinics, such as waiting periods and mandated counseling. According to the Guttmacher Institute, between 2011 and 2019, nearly 500 abortion restrictions were enacted across the country — accounting for more than a third of all restrictions enacted since the Roe v. Wade case in 1973. Recently, abortion has dominated the news due to Amy Coney Barrett, a devout Catholic who has expressed hostility to abortion rights, joining the Supreme Court.

A recent study commissioned by NARAL Pro-Choice America and conducted by an independent research group examined a random sample of more than 300 abortion-related articles across 10 major news outlets. It found that while 65% of articles quoted a politician, only 13.5% included a quote from a doctor and only 8% featured a real person's story.

A 2018 study by Advancing New Standards in



Sarah Roberts, an abortion doula and daughter of activist Laurie Bertram Roberts, outside the Mississippi Reproductive Freedom Fund

PREVIOUS SPREAD: A Mississippi resident, given the pseudonym Kate in Becca Andrews' Mother Jones story, struggled for months to gain access to an abortion

PREVIOUS SPREAD AND THIS PAGE: ANNIE FLANAGAN

More often than not, the people most affected by abortion access end up invisible in stories. Journalists have a responsibility to change that

Reproductive Health, a research group at the University of California, San Francisco, that examined abortion coverage in The New York Times, The Washington Post, and The Associated Press found similar results: 50% of stories were about electoral politics. References to the fetus as a person were more common than women's own stories of unintended pregnancy and abortion. This is notable as there is a growing movement to afford legal rights to fetuses that are equal to or even supersede the rights of pregnant women. These efforts have led to the arrest of women for actions that could be perceived as endangering the fetus inside them. In 2019, an Alabama woman was charged with manslaughter after an incident in which she was shot while pregnant and her fetus died. The charges were later dropped.

Centering pregnant women's experiences in stories about abortion poses real difficulties for reporters and editors. It takes patience and perseverance to gain the trust of activists working directly with patients, and to find people willing to talk on the record. Those who have sought abortions may be reluctant to speak openly due to societal pressure, fear, shame, anxiety, and judgment. Speaking out can also result in negative consequences for women, who may face harassment if they use their real names.

Journalists who interview such subjects must ensure they approach the interview and reporting process with care and sensitivity. For Andrews, that meant as soon as she met up with Kate, they had an off-the-record talk at the hotel pool where they had a chance to get comfortable with each other before diving into more emotionally fraught terrain. "I took a while to just hang out with her and get a feel for who she was," Andrews says. "After a while, I explained what 'on the record' means and the broad rules of journalism."

Kate had already agreed to be in the story, but Andrews wanted to make sure the young woman understood what it would mean to be the main source for a magazine story about a controversial topic, even with her identity hidden. "There's this complicated layer: She's very young, she's vulnerable, she's in a position where her whole life is sort of hanging by a thread if she

couldn't get the health care that she needs," Andrews says.

Once she had written a draft, Andrews checked in with Kate about the exact details she was including to make sure Kate was comfortable that they could not be used to identify her. It was a balancing act, she says, to include as much specificity as possible to ensure Kate's account felt real, while not using anything that could jeopardize her privacy.

One of her goals, Andrews says, was to introduce as much complexity into the story as possible. In her opinion, abortion coverage suffers when journalists shy away from contradictions and murky areas. "People get so caught up in the politics and the activism of it ... It makes people leery of looking at the whole thing, because they want to adhere to a certain narrative that helps advance the agenda," she says. "Sometimes I'll write something and I'll ask myself, 'Am I sugarcoating

a little? Am I, like, trying to make this simpler than it really is?' It's an important thing for me to be asking myself when I'm writing."

The subject of regret is a particularly dicey area, she adds: "There are women who have really complicated feelings about their abortions, and that's really valid." But those stories are often downplayed by those advocating for abortion rights for fear of giving fuel to the anti-abortion side.

"AKA Jane Roe," a documentary released in May of 2020 about Norma McCorvey, the "Jane Roe" whose unwanted pregnancy led to the 1973 case that legalized abortion nationwide, offers a cautionary tale about flattening the experience of women seeking abortion. It explores how McCorvey, who switched from being an abortion rights supporter to an outspoken anti-abortion activist, was exploited by those on both sides of the debate, her story used to push a political agenda when

ANNIE FLANAGAN

it was convenient. (Before she died, she confessed that her anti-abortion switch was a paid act.)

One big obstacle in writing about abortion is that many traditional news organizations require reporters to include "both sides" of the issue, aiming to find balance on controversial topics. This commitment to neutrality can work when both sides present honest information that offer readers needed context. However, a problem arises when misleading or untrue statements about abortion are made and repeated in news reports, often without being fact-checked.

For example, abortion opponents often claim that abortion hurts women. A new book, "The Turnaway Study: Ten Years, a Thousand Women, and the Consequences of Having — or Being Denied — an Abortion" by Diana Greene Foster, debunks this and should be cited by journalists who include quotes about the supposed negative consequences of abortion. Her



"When Choice is 221 Miles Away: The Nightmare of Getting an Abortion in the South" highlighted the lack of access to abortions in places like Oxford, Mississippi

The failure to cover abortion through the lens of

health care is particularly acute now,

in the midst of a historic pandemic

study found, for example, that women who have abortions are no more likely to suffer from depression than women who do not, disproving a common anti-abortion talking point.

A 2017 study conducted by researchers in California of journalists recruited from listservs for progressive or feminist reporters who have reported on abortion found that many struggled with how to responsibly include information from sources who were repeating inaccurate information. Study participants noted that the desire to be seen as unbiased and include context from both sides had, in some cases, led to the incorporation of misinformation into their coverage.

As a reporter covering abortion at HuffPost, I struggled with this issue in a profile I wrote of a young anti-abortion pastor in Texas. I pitched the story because I believe there is news value in understanding the current anti-abortion movement and its central players. My story, “The Traveling Salesman Bringing Abortion Bans To A Texas Town Near You,” which came out in March of 2020, followed Mark Lee Dickson as he lobbied a small town to pass an unconstitutional bill banning abortion. I wanted to explore Dickson’s history and personal motivations, but I was also cognizant not to further amplify dishonest information.

At one point, he showed me a plastic toy fetus that he claimed was anatomically correct. He used the prop to convince people that abortion of a fetus that size was immoral. Before including this and a photo of the toy in my story, I checked with an ob-gyn, sending her a link to where the model was sold online with its dimensions. She replied that it was oversimplified, exaggerated in size, with its large facial features made to appear more adult. Fact-checking allowed me to use the details offered by my source without spreading misinformation.

I also strived to show the real-world impact of his efforts to erode abortion access. I went to the town where he was trying to outlaw abortion and spoke to a handful of women who were angry and scared. They were worried that he had sowed more confusion in an area already extremely hostile to abortion, and that women who wanted to seek abortions might not because they would be un-

clear of their rights and fearful of prosecution.

Striking the balance between including both sides without spreading false information was a major challenge for filmmaker Neha Shastry, who made “Restricting Abortion Access,” a short documentary for CNN, in 2018. The segment centers on Anuj Khattar, a doctor based in Washington state who travels to Oklahoma once a month to provide abortions at a clinic called Trust Women. In many parts of the country, abortions are provided by doctors like Khattar, who travel to areas without abortion providers so that access does not completely disappear.

It took Shastry a few years to get a news organization interested in the story, she says, and some outlets turned it down because the topic was too polarizing. In the meantime, she collected research and developed an ongoing relationship with the founder of Trust Women, Julie Burkhart, a longtime abortion rights activist who worked with the late Dr. George Tiller before he was killed by an anti-abortion extremist. By the time CNN expressed interest in the story, Shastry had built a strong foundation with Burkhart, who trusted her enough to allow her to bring in a camera crew for a week of shooting.

That access paid off: Her documentary provides a rarely seen glimpse of the day-to-day work of an abortion doctor as he interacts with women in a clinic. Khattar, the traveling physician, is shown counseling patients, some of whom are scared and misinformed about the procedure they are about to have.

“I’m not sure how the procedure works ... do you rip it apart?” asks one patient, whose face is not shown. Khattar says no and explains the medical procedure slowly, asking if she has any more questions. When he hands her the ultrasound photo, she is crying. “I know it can be really emotional,” he says. “There’s a lot of conflicting emotions that can come up. Sadness and anger and happiness can all happen at the same time. It’s okay to have all those emotions.”

The film humanizes abortion providers, who are often caricatured by anti-abortion groups as evil, money-hungry doctors, and shows the toll of doing the work. Khattar tells Shastry he is nervous about the documentary, as it will likely open him up to more harassment.

When Shastry initially envisioned the film, she was not planning to include an abortion opponent voice, but editors at CNN suggested it as a way to bring balance. “The personal challenge for me in trying to find someone to fill the anti-abortion voice ... was really trying to find someone who wasn’t lying,” she says.

As the piece centered on a doctor who supports abortion rights, she decided to find an anti-abortion leader from the medical community to best address his claims. She settled on Christina Francis, a practicing ob-gyn, and chair of the board of the American Association of Pro-Life Obstetricians and Gynecologists (AAPLOG).

Much of the documentary centers on the impact of what abortion rights groups call “targeted regulation of abortion providers,” or TRAP laws, which are often onerous requirements imposed on abortion providers and women’s health centers. While abortion opponents say such measures are needed to protect wom-

en’s health, abortion rights groups say TRAP laws are an underhanded way to shut down abortion clinics.

These alternative belief systems were on display when Shastry interviewed Francis. In the film, Francis explains her belief that abortion is bad for women and is dangerous. When Shastry pointed to studies showing that abortion is a safe procedure, Francis says that the data has been cherry-picked. To buttress her claims, Shastry says, Francis sent her a handful of studies, but when she reviewed them, she found that they didn’t meet medical and scientific standards. Basic fact-checking made it hard to include Francis’ statements without countering them as part of the documentary, she says.

In the end, she kept in many of Francis’ claims but followed them up immediately with the facts. Looking back, Shastry still feels conflicted about the final product.

“I’m proud that we have both sides of the debate showcased, and we have on camera someone who is a well-known pro-life advocate spreading misinformation,” she says. “But at the same time, knowing that it was a requirement by the network to include this voice doesn’t sit well with me, that abortion is too ‘divisive’ to sit on its own in a news story is disappointing to me, and that it’s seemingly more valuable to include the lies in order to showcase the experiences of the clinic and the workers in it.”

One of her takeaways from the project was how fraught it is to report on abortion. “We are now living in a moment where, I hope, newsrooms and networks are taking an honest look at themselves and how certain issues are covered,” Shastry says. “This isn’t quite the moment where people may be reflecting on how abortion is covered, but I think the ethical standards are the same as when examining how we cover race — what voices do we amplify, and at what cost? Why is it that those who are marginalized by an issue cannot stand alone in a story?”

Even the specific language used in articles on abortion is deeply contentious. From the beginning of the abortion debate, both sides have branded themselves using politically charged terms like “pro-life,” which suggests that those who support abortion rights must be against life, or “pro-choice,” which obscures the medical procedure at hand.

For this story, I used the terms “anti-abortion” activists and “abortion opponents” interchangeably; both are accurate depictions of their goals. For their adversaries, I used “abortion rights” activists and “reproductive rights” groups, which summarizes their position.

Recently, abortion opponents began dubbing early abortion bans as “fetal heartbeat bills,” which prohibit abortion once an ultrasound can detect electrical activity in cells that will control the heart once it develops.

CNN



Neha Shastry is the producer of the CNN documentary “Restricting Abortion Access,” which highlights a doctor from Washington who travels to Oklahoma monthly to provide abortions

That electrical activity can occur as early as two weeks after a missed period. Reproductive rights groups urged news organizations not to use the term “heartbeat bill,” arguing that it is a misnomer as the fetus does not yet have a heart at six weeks’ gestation. A number of media organizations have issued new guidelines on what terminology to use when covering abortion to ensure that they avoid medically inaccurate, misleading language.

In 2019, Alison Mitchell, who helps guide daily news coverage at The New York Times, noticed a shift in messaging by those working for and against abortion rights, and a slew of unfamiliar, politically charged terms. She asked a reporter to look into it for an article. The resulting piece by Amy Harmon, “‘Fetal Heartbeat’ vs. ‘Forced Pregnancy’: The Language Wars of the Abortion Debate,” tracks the evolving language of abortion used by abortion opponents and supporters, and how such messaging might impact public perception.

Language has a powerful effect in shaping the narrative, Mitchell says. “Abortion, like many hard-fought political movements, is about hearts and minds,” she adds. “Both sides are trying to shape the way people view it.”

The best reporting on abortion attempts to be as honest as possible, avoiding euphemisms or loaded language, she says: “It is a very, very emotional issue on both sides. I think part of the way you get into the subtleties of it is by talking to people who chose to have an abortion, talking to people who chose not to have an abortion, and have them think about how it affected their lives.”

This is the crucial challenge that reporters must live up to now. It is not enough to merely repeat the details of abortion bills and expect readers to understand what is at stake. Reporters should work to find the people most affected by abortion restrictions and speak to them. They should seek out and interview doctors with expertise in abortion. They should contextualize abortion as health care, not simply political fodder. Those voices are out there. It is up to reporters and editors to put the work in to find them. ■

GONE, BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

Problems of
media mistrust,
conspiracy theories,
and journalism's
economic
sustainability are
not going away
anytime soon

BY CELESTE KATZ MARSTON



When political writer Seema Mehta of the Los Angeles Times hit the trail to cover Election Day voting in Michigan, she had some new equipment in her bag: Gas mask. Helmet. Goggles. “It was a little surreal,” she says. “This is my fourth presidential, and it’s the first time I’ve been fitted for a gas mask and handed riot gear.”

Reporters needing to outfit themselves like war correspondents just to cover the American political process is emblematic of how the practice of journalism — and the problems facing the press — have changed in the Age of Trump.

During Trump’s tenure, as reporters have well documented, America has seen a rise in open expressions of white nationalism and other forms of extremism. Meanwhile, suspicion of the media is rampant. As many as half of Americans have said they distrust information disseminated by the media about the deadly coronavirus. “Alternative facts.” Hyperpartisanship and polarization. The dismantling of political traditions and norms.

All of it was on display for the world at 2:21 a.m. on election night, when the president — speaking from the White House as his hopes for a second term stood imperiled — announced that the democratic process itself should not be trusted.

Despite the election victory of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris, what is already clear is that these problems are not going away anytime soon. Here is a look at key challenges that, for both the press and the public, will remain.

THE ASSAULT ON FACTS WILL CONTINUE

Shortly before the 2020 election, a survey by STAT, the Boston-based outlet focused on health, science, and medicine, in conjunction with The Harris Poll, found that the percentage of Americans who said they were likely to get a Covid-19 vaccine as soon as it came online was falling, especially among Black Americans. The findings concern STAT executive editor Rick Berke, who says they point to a decrease of trust in scientific institutions and government.

“Scientists obviously are not infallible and should always be questioned, but I’ve never seen such an extraordinary politicization of science, with health officials being questioned about the very basic, straightforward steps to protect us all, [such as] wearing masks” during the pandemic, Berke says. The “public confidence in

science and health officials that were sort of always assumed [to] have the last word on public health issues is no longer a sure thing.”

In the period around Election Day, the United States found itself grappling with 10 million cases of coronavirus and more than 237,000 deaths, with a new record high of more than 100,000 new cases per day. Former Trump advisor Steve Bannon got his Twitter account suspended for saying Dr. Anthony Fauci, the country’s top infectious-disease authority, should have his head on a pike. There’s been some positive news as well, with vaccines being administered as of mid-December.

Moving ahead, Berke foresees major issues for leading health and science agencies. “This is going to be an enduring problem, [where] you can’t uncouple the politics from science so easily anymore. ... Science is now open season for partisan attacks and wrangling, and it would be irresponsible for us not to write about that.”

Public disagreement about basic facts — and disputes over coverage of them — is hardly limited to the health space, says David Folkenflik, media correspondent for National Public Radio.

“We’re going to have a lot of severe questioning of the good faith of major institutions, including the press,” he says. “It includes government agencies that aren’t partisan outfits ... The press has to figure out a way to convey faith in itself — and in other similar,



somewhat analogous institutions — without papering over flaws and shortcomings and problems in them.”

The challenge comes as Trump continues to claim without evidence that he won an election massively tarred by Democratic voter fraud — and one that resulted in a Republican proponent of the inflammatory and baseless QAnon conspiracy theory being elected to the House from Georgia.

Amid all this controversy, “Journalists have to do their job [and] prove their value,” Folkenflik says. “For conservatives who mistrust the press, they’ll find if we serve them well, that ... there may be wrongs righted, or scandals exposed by the press in ways that they respect.”

IT WILL TAKE TIME FOR NORMS TO RETURN (IF THEY RETURN AT ALL)

It’s a truism to say that Donald Trump shattered norms, which he certainly did by the boatload. Those norms will not simply pop back into existence if and when Donald Trump leaves the political stage,” says Mark Lukasiewicz, dean of the Lawrence Herbert School of Communication at Hofstra University, a former senior vice president at NBC News, and a former executive producer at ABC News. “I work with young journalism students all the time, and ... to be prepared to work in an environment where there isn’t a shared common understanding of

fact — that is new, and it’s troublesome.”

“The total breakdown of White House briefings is something I hope is not permanent, because the original point [was] not entertainment for the partisans; it is to get information out of a variety of subjects,” says Walter Shapiro, a veteran reporter now with The New Republic and also a Yale lecturer in political science.

To Shapiro, the bar has been dramatically and sadly lowered: “Even just a non-revealing [White House] press operation that is total spin, but no overt hostility to the press, would be a quantum leap forward.”

Anita Kumar, White House correspondent for Politico, says she’ll be watching to see if Biden will take any cues from Trump: “The criticism [of] Biden-Harris is that they don’t really answer questions from the media, and they’re really quite closed. Some of that, of course, is coronavirus, but some of it must be that they think that’s their strategy to be that way. It’ll be interesting to see [if Biden] is going to be out there talking.”

Laura Figueroa Hernandez, who covers the White House for Long Island, N.Y.-based Newsday, believes what Trump has fostered in politics will have a lasting effect — and that he himself may not go away even after he leaves public office. That raises the practical question: How much ink does he get? “He’s still going to be kind of this voice that’s going to continue to be a part of our culture and of our everyday news cycle. ... Reporters are going to have to recognize that. That said, how much

“THE PRESS HAS TO FIGURE OUT A WAY TO CONVEY FAITH IN ITSELF WITHOUT PAPERING OVER FLAWS AND SHORTCOMINGS AND PROBLEMS”

DAVID FOLKENFLIK, NPR

PREVIOUS SPREAD: President Donald Trump speaks at the White House shortly after Election Day in November 2020

OPPOSITE: A member of ReOpen Maryland attends a Salisbury, Maryland rally calling for the reopening of the state amidst the coronavirus outbreak in May

PREVIOUS SPREAD: EVAN VUCCI/ASSOCIATED PRESS
TOM BRENNER/REUTERS

attention do you pay to that?" she asks.

There's already been a shift on this during Trump's time in office. At the beginning of Trump's campaign and during parts of his tenure as president, it was common for television to carry his full remarks and rallies live. Notably, real-time fact-checking has become far more frequent. The three major broadcast networks veered away from live Trump coverage post-election as the president baselessly claimed that the election had been stolen.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND LOCAL REPORTING WILL REMAIN ESSENTIAL

Michael Edison Hayden, a senior investigative reporter for the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) who specializes in studying extremist groups, believes looking ahead for journalists will involve looking back. "There is going to [be] four years of trying to figure out what happened from 2014 until now, because in 2014 is when you first start to see this emergence of the alt-right movement," he says.

Coverage of the far right has increased dramatically since 2016. While the proliferation of "disinformation and extremism" reporting since the violent 2017 "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia is a good thing, Hayden remains concerned that newsrooms only have so much bandwidth and still need to be covering bedrock issues such as education and housing. And the risks to reporters remain.

"The tools are cheap, and the tactics are easy, and the incentives are plentiful, so it doesn't have to be Trump. It doesn't have to be politics," says one television producer who covers the intersection of technology and extremist theories.

However, "if you capitulate to it, [you're] allowing it to proliferate," says the producer, who spoke anonymously because of the onslaught of harassment he said he's received from supporters of QAnon and white nationalism. "Then I become complicit in it, and I know that that's what it's designed to do."

"Biden's agenda will likely in and of itself focus reporters' attention on issues that matter," says one media reporter. For example, Biden has said that he would have the U.S. rejoin the climate accords. "Obviously, global warming and the rise of greenhouse gases is an existential issue for the world, and the new administration's focus on that point would allow beat reporters who cover the White House [to] dig in on that specific issue. It may be the case that by virtue of Biden's relatively sober agenda, the tenor of the reporting could become relatively sober as well."

At the same time, says the reporter, who was not authorized to speak on behalf of his news organization, a change in administration won't necessarily change the public's news appetite for "palace intrigue" stories about the White House. "There's a lot of demand for those stories," he says, "and so I don't think that as soon as President Trump leaves [that] will necessarily fix the demand-side problem, where suddenly there'll be overwhelming demand for abstruse policy stories."

Yet those policy stories are pressing. Criminal justice reform, just as one example, got some traction in the 2020 contest, including discussions of changing prison conditions and the penalties for drug offenses. Now that the election is over, however, there are still "2.2 million people incarcerated in the United States. There are still a lot of stories to do about where we are when it comes to crime and punishment — and to some degree why it is that [no] matter who the president is, we seem to still find ourselves writing about and covering the same issues," says Aaron Morrison, who covers race and ethnicity for The Associated Press.

"The most important lines of coverage will and should continue to be the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on Black and Latinx communities, as well as the criminal justice reform movement under an administration that promised to answer the cries of the millions of protesters who took to the streets this summer," Morrison believes. Additionally, he says, "A specific focus should be on American poverty, which stood to worsen amid the collapse of businesses large and small."

Ironically, one hard-hit business is the local news industry. At the same time national politics suck up huge amounts of oxygen and fatigue Americans, local news continues to struggle, and that has a real impact on communities. A 24/7 Trump-fueled cycle definitely gets eyeballs. In that context, covering, say, the zoning board of appeals or water regulations may seem granular and mundane — until it isn't.

"The best example of that is what happened in Flint, Michigan," the SPLC's Hayden points out. "There's a 'boring' [story] that's like, 'Oh, who cares? They're just routing these pipes to a different place and, whatever, [it's] just water.' And then next thing you know, there's an entire generation of people who are living with the scars of that horror that took place."

When it comes to accountability journalism, Hayden sees a two-pronged approach: "The balance is to report on the White House fairly and with a critical eye, but be able to call out coordinated far-right disinformation campaigns aggressively and prevent them from reaching mainstream audiences without being heavily contextualized. ... Send some journalists to tell the unvarnished truth about Biden and his staff and send the others to find the origins of these coordinated far-right campaigns created to destroy him and destroy our democracy."

THE FIGHT AGAINST MISINFORMATION — AND FOR ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY — WILL INTENSIFY

Social media platforms have made some attempt to flag questionable material with warnings — including tweets by the president himself about election fraud and other matters. But many reporters and scholars are highly critical of platforms like Facebook, which they say have moved too slowly to squelch disinformation and violent extremism.

Brooke Binkowski, managing editor of the misinformation-debunking site TruthOrFiction.com, worked with Facebook in a fact-checking partnership with



Snopes until 2019, when the agreement was dissolved. Given the proliferation of lies and extremism on social media, she is among the reporters who advocate a strong culture shift to combat what she describes as dark, economically linked forces. "I've turned into a proselytizer against the cult of 'objectivity.' That's not to say, 'Don't be fair.' That's not to say, 'Don't be transparent.' But this objectivity has been used to drag the national conversation to the far right," she says.

"We need to rethink our roles," says Binkowski, who has a particular focus on human rights issues tied to borders and migration. "We need to understand that we are fighting for the truth, and we're fighting for good information and the betterment of society around us by shining lights on the lies and the things that would otherwise be obscured."

The answer may lie, for starters, in the press simply applying the same degree of intensity in questioning and fact-checking Biden as was the case for Trump. "There's so much unreality in the Trump administration, and there has been for so long, that just reporting the truth can seem like a partisan act," notes the media reporter who asked to speak anonymously because he wasn't authorized to give an interview. "That has led many conservatives to think of the media as a left-wing organization ... I think that it's possible the pendulum will swing in the other direction when the American public sees the press corps scrutinizing a Democratic president."

RICK LOOMIS/GETTY IMAGES

In late 2018, the Pew Research Center announced that, for the first time in America, social media had overtaken print newspapers as a source of news. A more recent Pew report, from October 2020, hammers home the toll Covid-19 has taken on the economy broadly and the news business specifically: Newspaper companies, already experiencing a "long economic downturn," suffered more damage than television and were especially hard-hit in the second quarter of 2020, Pew found, with ad revenue plunging by a median 42%.

This past August, The New York Times reported that in the second quarter of 2020, it brought in more revenue from digital subscriptions and ads than from print, or \$185.5 million and \$175.4 million, respectively.

There is evidence that local news is continuing to shrink — and making cuts to watchdog coverage of government as they go. More than 11,000 newsroom jobs were lost just in the first six months of 2020. "The Trump era and the Trump war on the press should not mask the biggest factor of all: That there is no economic underpinning for more than one or two national newspapers, and the fact is that the entire profession is in economic dire straits," says veteran reporter Shapiro.

"The fact that even where local news is moderately thriving, in places like Boston and Los Angeles, it is because of billionaires who seemingly are doing this as an act of charity," says Shapiro. To be "a trusted institution, it has to become an economically secure institution." ■

"SCIENCE IS NOW OPEN SEASON FOR PARTISAN ATTACKS AND WRANGLING, AND IT WOULD BE IRRESPONSIBLE FOR US NOT TO WRITE ABOUT THAT"

RICK BERKE, STAT

> WHAT'S

> NEXT

BACK TO NORMAL?

After Trump turned things upside down, political reporters prepare to cover the Biden administration

BY ALLEGRA HOBBS



IT'S NOT AS
THOUGH THE
POLITICAL PRESS
WILL FLIP A
SWITCH AND
REVERT TO THE
PRE-TRUMP ERA

For the four years President Trump was in office, political journalists covered an administration which repeatedly attacked the press, calling them the “enemy of the people,” and which repeatedly lied, most recently about a deadly virus ravaging the nation and about the election that handed victory to now President-elect Joe Biden — results Trump has falsely claimed are the result of fraud.

Now Trump is on the way out, and the press finds itself preparing to cover what is likely to be a — comparatively — bland Biden administration. Though journalists will still be covering a time of intense tumult — Covid-19 cases spreading like wildfire, an economy in freefall, an ongoing reckoning over racial injustice — for the first time in four years, the president will not be a wildly erratic figure who is also a documented serial liar.

But it's not as though the political press will flip a switch and revert back to the pre-Trump era — this unusual administration has left its mark. Elisabeth Bumiller, assistant managing editor and Washington bureau chief at The New York Times, notes the considerable volume of misinformation coming from the Trump administration transformed a more credulous pre-existing dynamic of political coverage.

“In the old days, it was much more of a ‘Republicans said this today, but Democrats countered with that,’ and Trump changed all that,” says Bumiller. “We have a formulation now with Trump of, ‘The president falsely said.’ Occasionally we have said, ‘The president lied.’ We have changed our approach so that we determine the best we can what the actual truth is and then say it, as opposed to doing this both sides thing, and I think that will continue now.”

Of course, it's too early to know what covering a Biden administration will be like, but if the presidential debates are anything to go by, there will likely be fewer outright falsehoods, misleading statements, and exaggerations to parse. “Politicians distort, they exaggerate, but nothing like Trump, so I think we may go back to something we're more used to,” says Bumiller. “But I do think there will be an effort for us to determine what the reality is based on our reporting. I think both-siderism was dying anyway, before Trump.”

Nathan McDermott, political reporter for CNN's KFile, predicts the dynamic of “mutual deference and respect” between politicians and political reporters ended with the Trump era: “It's a bit naive to think the world will return to that again. I think political reporters have become a lot more understanding of bad faith actors and people who not only lie but lie to reporters

to try to get their message out ... I think we're up to the task, I just think we need to resist the idea that things are going to be just like they were before Trump.”

The reasons for this extend beyond shifting attitudes within the press corps. For one, the misinformation borne of Trumpism, now rampant on social media, isn't going anywhere. For another, Trump's influence on the Republican party will not wither away when he exits the White House. “I think with Trumpism out of the box, he's really energized a lot of Republicans,” says McDermott. “There's definitely going to be a lot of Trump acolytes and followers who will pursue office because they've been inspired by him, and they like his message.”

This has already happened. Far-right media figure and self-described “proud Islamophobe” Laura Loomer ran this election for Congress in Florida's 21st District with the vocal support of President Trump — she lost to Democratic congresswoman Lois Frankel, but garnered 39.2% of the vote.

Kadia Goba, politics reporter who covered the Trump administration for BuzzFeed News and is now at Axios, says before going on the campaign trail this election season, she thought the Republican party might become more centrist in its leanings “to appeal to a broader community.” Her repeated attendance at Trump rallies shifted her perspective: “You get the sentiment people are leaning more and more right.” When I spoke to her a few days before the election, she pointed to Loomer's run in Florida, and QAnon conspiracy theorist Marjorie Taylor Greene running for Congress in Georgia. (She went on to win.)

“There are people who support QAnon that are at the doors of Congress right now,” Goba says. “I thought

the tactical response for Republicans would be, ‘Why don't we go a little more centrist and try to work with the Democrats on some kind of legislation, so we're not deadlocked?’ But there seems to be an appetite for extremism here.”

Outlets will have to make editorial (and ethical) judgments about how to cover Trump moving forward, if at all. At the very least, hanging on his every word will no longer be necessary. “I don't think what he says is relevant unless it has a real impact on the world — and that may be less and less true,” says media columnist Ben Smith of The New York Times. “Often picking a fight with the press is the point, and you don't have to engage.”

Still, it seems unlikely Trump himself — or his influence — will disappear in a Biden presidency. Republican leaders, far from repudiating Trump, have continued to demonstrate their loyalty, backing the president's refusal to concede the election. Rick Klein, political director of ABC News, said in a pre-election interview that “win or lose, Trump isn't going anywhere. I think there will be candidates for 2024 and congressional candidates and members of Congress who will learn different lessons from Trump. There will be some who mimic the policy divisions and the style, and others who take the opposite lessons and say, ‘We need to change what the party stands for and reclaim it.’”

Divisions on the left will continue to deepen as well; those divisions were not front and center in the months leading up to the election because the emphasis was on defeating Trump and managing national crises. “The whole run-up to the [Democratic National] Convention, which normally would have been left versus center and ‘What's the party's platform look like’ was just consumed by the coronavirus and the economic collapse and the racial reckoning,” says Klein. As Biden ascends to the presidency, efforts by the party's more progressive wing to push the president-elect left will resume.

“Embrace the uncertainty,” says Klein. “I can't presume to know who the future leaders of the Democratic Party or the Republican Party are. If you rewound to the aftermath of Clinton's loss four years ago, [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez] hadn't run for office yet, no one had heard of her. I think most people presumed Joe Biden was well into political retirement and was not coming back.”

Exiting the Trump era poses some existential as well as practical questions for news outlets. During the Trump presidency, outlets were forced to match a hostile administration with a new level of scrutiny, vigilance, and aggressive debunking. Now they will have to make decisions about covering a Biden administration. Will they take a similarly aggressive stance? Will they take it as an opportunity to showcase their neutrality?

“I do think that the mainstream press has been very defensive in recent years about being called part of the Democratic apparatus,” says Margaret Sullivan, media columnist for The Washington Post and previously the public editor of The New York Times. “Journalists want to be seen as independent, so when they're accused of being part of the political system spewing talking points for the DNC and so on, they become even more careful about not looking like they're biased in any way, and that

can sometimes play out as letting official sources get away with too much ... I don't know how it's going to sort of translate [to the Biden administration], but it's also hard to believe that it's going to quickly go back to the way it was before.”

Cable news networks will also have to make determinations about tone moving forward. For Fox, the answer may be more straightforward — after all, after eight years of criticizing Obama, they “transitioned into non-stop praising Trump, feeding him ideas,” observes media analyst Rick Edmonds of Poynter. “I think they may need to get a new act, though presumably they'll have plenty to complain about with a Democratic administration.”

Cable networks more left-leaning than Fox may have a more complex reckoning with regards to tone, however. “In some ways I think it's a little harder for MSNBC particularly — and CNN to an extent — that you can't be in relentless opposition with the person you're opposing, who isn't there anymore,” says Edmonds. “Many more people watch the network evening news, which is more down the middle of the road, but the cable networks are really contributors to hyper-partisanship and it will be interesting to see if there is any soul searching and kind of course adjustment.”

Then there is the existential and practical matter of subscriptions and viewership. Outlets have enjoyed a “Trump bump” over the last four years as record numbers of media consumers have shown an increased interest in staying informed. The New York Times Company saw its income double during the third quarter of 2020, raking in a whopping 7 million subscribers. Will a slump necessarily follow?

“I think the question of whether people will be as deeply involved in news coverage, whether new consumers will be as interested as they have been during a four-year crisis of democracy — it seems unlikely they'll be as glued to national politics as they have been,” says Sullivan. “But I don't know that any particular kind of coverage of the Biden administration will change. Trump called himself a ratings machine, and in many ways he was — he knew how to command attention, he will continue to command attention. That I think is a more likely scenario: that people will stay tuned because he's not going to leave the stage.”

Bumiller suspects Times readers will stay tuned in, whether for political coverage or the paper's other offerings. “There's a lot of interest in Biden now, and we think that will continue into the year,” says Bumiller. She also observes that many Times readers were attracted to non-political pieces — about arts, travel, culture, food, and music. “The Times has also been aware for years of the ‘Trump bump’ as we called it, but it turns out people have stayed with the Times and have read things beyond Trump coverage.”

And while it seems unlikely Trump's time in the spotlight will fade away anytime soon, outlets will ultimately have to make determinations about how, when, and to what extent he should continue to be covered. It certainly shouldn't be done for the sake of ratings, argues Sullivan, but “If it's truly newsworthy, then yes, it makes sense to cover it to a certain point.” ■

PREVIOUS SPREAD:
President-elect
Joe Biden, on the
campaign trail
in March 2020,
departs after
delivering remarks
on the coronavirus
in Wilmington,
Delaware

PREVIOUS SPREAD: DREW ANGERER/GETTY IMAGES

> WHAT'S
> NEXT

ADAPTING TO AUTOCRACY

How journalists in
Belarus, Jordan,
Thailand, and
Nicaragua are
fighting back
against government
intimidation

BY MADELEINE SCHWARTZ



President Trump may be leaving office but he and his rhetoric about fake news are here to stay. From the beginning of his presidential campaign, Trump has used the rubric “fake news” to demean and harass journalists; his administration has furthered this work by placing restrictions on how journalists operate. Trump’s attacks on journalists have been amplified by right-wing media and other members of the Republican party.

Whatever happens to Trumpism, the idea of “fake news” won’t disappear.

This summer saw hundreds of freedom of the press violations as journalists were attacked with rubber bullets and pepper spray while reporting on protests for racial justice. In the fall, the Department of Homeland Security proposed changing the visas given to foreign journalists to reduce their time in the United States from five years to 240 days, with an option to renew for another 240 days. Months before that, the Trump-appointed head of the U.S. Agency for Global Media, which includes the Voice of America news outlet, dismissed the leaders of several networks and replaced them with loyalists who share his conservative views.

Trump has also given autocrats around the world cover and inspiration for their own “fake news” campaigns. Those autocrats will continue to feel empowered even after Trump is out of office. To better understand how journalists facing this difficult environment might work and adapt, we looked to four countries where the mantle of “fake news” is used to intimidate and threaten. Here’s how journalists are responding to threats.

BELARUS

“Before the summer, it was totally safe to be a journalist in Belarus,” says Anton Trafimovich, a reporter with Radio Free Europe in Minsk. Arrests of independent journalists were common, but reporters felt they could still do their work. But ever since a contested election was called in favor of longtime dictatorial president Aleksandr G. Lukashenko, the situation has gotten far more violent. Journalists have regularly been shot with rubber bullets and have been hospitalized; Trafimovich himself was beaten and his nose was broken.

He recently went to pick up a journalist friend who had been detained for 15 days in a jail several hours out-

side of Minsk. Because of the number of arrests of journalists and activists, he says, “there is not enough space for detainees in Minsk.”

The charged environment comes out of the run-up to the 2020 election. The candidate for the opposition, Svetlana Tikhonovskaya, found greater popularity among Belarusian voters than expected. When exit polls showed Lukashenko — who has ruled the country for the 26 years since its independence — at 80% of the vote, protests erupted around the country. They were quickly followed by a brutal police and military response.

The arrests and violence have pushed journalists to work in new ways. Journalists no longer wear clothing identifying them as press for fear of being targeted. The violence also has prompted a change in news distribution: Media outlets have migrated onto the messaging platform Telegram.

As Valerie Ulasique, a Belarusian video journalist currently based in Poland, explains, many of the Telegram channels receive crowdsourced material and then distribute items that they can fact-check. Some of the most popular channels are run by activists, like longtime blogger Anton Matolka, whose channel has over 100,000 subscribers, according to Ulasique. But more traditional outlets like Radio Free Europe also distribute



their material on Telegram. According to Trafimovich, “all media are [now] Telegram channels and that’s it.”

The majority of reports distributed on Telegram are simply short sentences, photos, and videos of protests, as well as coverage of ongoing police brutality. “The visual content is extremely important,” says Trafimovich. Content is more likely to be sent now by ordinary Belarusians, who, says Trafimovich, wish to help the media in their coverage. Because police tend to attack people with professional equipment, both journalists and citizens have taken to filming on phones. Communicating via Telegram also helps journalists get around regular internet shutdowns.

Lukashenko has regularly called reports about his reign “fake news.” But the length of the protests, and the way the mainstream media have covered them, have weakened Lukashenko’s power, according to Trafimovich. “People don’t trust state media and don’t trust Lukashenko,” he says. “The media don’t quote him as much as before because there are new speakers. He is not the agenda setter anymore.” In the meantime, Trafimovich highlights that the increase in user-generated content not only expands people’s understanding of the protests, but helps journalists report and stay safe.

JORDAN

Special pieces of legislation in Jordan allow for prosecution whenever any government authority is uncomfortable, explains Sara Kayyali, a researcher at Human Rights Watch. There are the laws that criminalize talking poorly about the

king, country, and allies of Jordan. In August, a cartoonist was detained by Jordanian police for having drawn a cartoon satirizing the peace deal between the United Arab Emirates, an ally, and Israel. The cartoon showed a sheikh being spat on by a dove imprinted with the Israeli flag. This spring, restrictions put in place during the coronavirus pandemic threatened jail time for “causing panic” about the virus; a number of media executives and journalists have been detained on these grounds.

Since the definition of “terrorism” was broadened in 2015, crackdowns on the free press in Jordan have become steadily harsher. This has led to greater self-censorship among journalists. Many local journalists no longer wish to cover potentially controversial topics. “This year there were widespread teacher protests. The government disbanded their union and arrested their senior members,” explains Taylor Luck, a correspondent for The Christian Science Monitor who is based in Jordan. While he feels some sense of protection as an American journalist working abroad, “not a single Jordanian reporter reported on it.”

Luck explains that the new restrictions have made him “much more protective of sources.” He makes clear to sources the possible ramifications of speaking with a journalist. But it’s “burdensome and takes up a lot more time.” The red lines are being drawn not only about issues in Jordan but about reporting that has to do with the country’s allies, like Saudi Arabia. He cited the construction of a new “smart city” in Saudi Arabia, a pet project of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman that has forced the eviction of members of the

IN BELARUS,
THE ARRESTS
AND VIOLENCE
HAVE PUSHED
JOURNALISTS
TO WORK IN
NEW WAYS

PREVIOUS SPREAD:
Belarusian
opposition
supporters attend
an August 2020
protest in Minsk

OPPOSITE:
An anti-
government
protester gives
a three-finger
salute at a rally in
Bangkok, Thailand
in August 2020

PREVIOUS SPREAD: DMITRI LOVETSKY/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS
LAUREN DECICCA/GETTY IMAGES

Huwaitat tribe as an example of the kind of topic that is more difficult to write about. “It’s a second job managing this and navigating these invisible red lines,” he says. “Which are the hills that I’m ready to die on?”

Rana Husseini, a journalist who has focused on women’s issues over the course of a nearly 30-year career, says that self-censorship is now a powerful force among Jordanian journalists. “I feel more recently that we are less at liberty to talk about many things,” she says. As a result, there are stories that she doesn’t even pursue. “We had a case a few months ago where a woman was hit by her father [and she subsequently died]. People were really outraged and started to write about it.” But when the prosecutor’s office published a statement saying that ongoing cases could not be publicly discussed, the articles dried up.

While the effect of this censorship makes daily reporting more difficult, Luck points to the ways in which it has changed the media landscape. More people are sharing news in closed Facebook and WhatsApp groups. His articles get translated and passed around, he says. And instead of strengthening the voice of the government, censorship may be weakening it. “State news and media have lost legitimacy,” he says.

THAILAND

Freedom of the press has long been limited in Thailand, but reporting has become more challenging over the last few years. As criticism of both the royal family and new military rule has increased, so have prosecutions under the country’s strict *lèse-majesté* (forbidding the insulting of the monarchy) and cyber-crime laws. “When it comes to important matters, we cannot have conversations,” says Noppatjak Attanon, editor of *workpointTODAY*, an online news site. In 2019, the government created an “anti-fake news” center that would be staffed by around 30 people to target online content critical of the regime.

In the years following a military coup in 2014, prosecutions under these laws have increased. Activists and journalists have been arrested for their work, for Facebook posts, even for liking content online. The wave of repression has created a new set of news media, according to Daniel Bastard, a researcher at Reporters Without Borders. Sites like the *Isaan Record*, created in 2011, are more likely to publish articles critical of Thailand’s royal family.

At the *Isaan Record*, editor Hathairat Phaholtap was recently able to interview pro-democracy lawyer and activist Anon Nampa about his hopes to reform the monarchy, something Phaholtap says would not have been possible in her earlier job as a television news journalist at Thai PBS. “They wouldn’t let me interview that person or publish questions that criticize the monarchy, or criticize the king,” she says.

The site, which has a staff of six, has been monitored by the authorities, and has been visited by the police. Still, Phaholtap says that it is worth it to be able to do stories she really wants to do. Despite the enormous protests that have filled city streets, mainstream outlets “don’t talk about why the student movement [exists] or how to reform the monarchy,” she says. Audiences now look to “alternative media platforms” like hers in order to find news that corresponds to the reality of the political situation. She is careful to use encrypted messaging services and has increased her security on social media, processes which are “not fun” but help her complete her work more safely.

These new media discuss the protests in greater detail and are especially sought out by younger readers who wish to follow pro-democracy movements. Older viewers are more likely to watch television news, which

is carefully controlled by the government. Online news contains a greater proportion of “what people actually want to talk about,” says Attanon — among other things, social problems. This creates “a problem with political atmosphere. When people consume different things, they see things differently,” says Attanon.

Phaholtap recalls that when working at Thai PBS she had wanted to do a story on Foo Foo, the lavishly-treated dog of the former Crown Prince. She was not allowed to do so. But a new generation online, she says, doesn’t feel scared. “I try to forget working under the military rules,” she says.

NICARAGUA

This fall, lawmakers in Nicaragua approved two new pieces of legislation. The first would require anyone receiving payment from outside the country to register as a foreign agent. The second criminalized “fake news,” calling for four to six years in prison for anyone who causes “fear, anxiety, or alarm in the population,” but operating essentially as a gag order. Combined, the two laws make life for the country’s journalists — many

AMIDST POLITICAL TURMOIL, A REVIVAL OF TRUST IN JOURNALISM

After a contested election and government crackdown in Belarus, professional and citizen journalists respond with innovative coverage

BY ANNIE PHILIP

“Nearly everybody I know has been injured, beaten, detained, forced to flee, or has gone into hiding. It is personal. These are my friends. These are my fellow citizens,” says Belarusian journalist Hanna Liubakova. She has been a witness to this extraordinary period in the history of Belarus as massive protests rocked the country after the contested election in August of President Aleksandr G. Lukashenko, who has been in power for 26 years. Police brutality, detentions, deaths of protesters, and suppression of all forms of dissent have followed.

Belarus, a former Soviet republic, ranks 153rd (out of 180 countries) in Reporters Without Borders’ (RSF) 2020 World Press Freedom Index. RSF notes that 16 journalists are in prison and at least 60 journalists have been the victims of serious violence, mistreatment, and/or torture by the police. There have been 335 arrests of journalists and more than 400 press freedom violations over the last three months. After cancelling the accreditation of some foreign press personnel in August and deporting some journalists, government officials in October cancelled the accreditation of all foreign journalists and mandated that they re-apply under new rules.

To the outside world, Liubakova’s tweets and reports have become an important source of news from Belarus.

A 2019 World Press Institute Fellow, Liubakova is a freelance journalist and media trainer with *Transitions Online*, a Prague-based media development organization. She has worked with *Belsat TV*, *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, and *Outriders in Minsk*.

Nieman Reports reached out to Liubakova to learn about her work and the role of independent media in Belarus. This interview was edited for length and clarity.

You grew up in Minsk, Belarus, which does not have a tradition of a free press. How did you decide on a career in journalism?

I remember the moment very well. It was the 2010 presidential election in Belarus. The election in Belarus is always rigged. We knew who would be the winner. I studied in Poland then. I remember this train full of students who were travelling back to Belarus. There was a massive protest on December 19. We all knew we would protest, that we would come out on the streets after the election result was announced. There were thousands of people at the protest. There was a harsh crackdown. The police were brutal. More than 700 people were detained. Nearly all my friends were detained, and many were beaten. The other presidential candidates were detained.

I had hopes. I thought this massive demonstration would change something. It was a tragedy for me. I returned to Poland to study art history. I worked as a curator and loved it. But I understood it might not be enough. I felt I might do more as a journalist. So I joined the independent station *Belsat TV*. Banned in Belarus, it is based in Warsaw, Poland. I believed I would be able to disseminate useful information which would save lives and protect people.

Now I can see how much has changed in Belarus because people got access to information. Access to facts



about the pandemic, about corruption, about economic struggles in Belarus. People saw that citizens all over the country did not support Lukashenko. Belarusians turned to independent media, bloggers, and social media channels to get unbiased information. This kind of trust is important.

What role has the independent press in Belarus played over the last few months?

continued on next page

Belarusian journalist Hanna Liubakova is an important source providing outsiders a look at the protests — and suppression — that have rocked her country

of whom have already suffered repression and are in exile — even more difficult.

Since 2018, the country's longstanding president Daniel Ortega and his wife, Rosario Murillo, who serves as both vice president and de facto press secretary, have focused on cracking down on any form of opposition or criticism. "They say, 'Well, now we are going to determine what is false information,'" says Carlos Chamorro, the founder and editor of the news site Confidencial. "That's not going to change the way in which we work."

Chamorro's newsroom was occupied by police in 2019; he went into exile and only recently returned. Many other reporters remain aboard, including Lucia Pineda, a journalist arrested and held in prison for six months in 2019 under trumped-up charges, who now runs her site 100% Noticias from Costa Rica with a reduced staff, many of whom are also in exile.

Whether inside the country or outside, the pressures of the regime have forced journalists to take a more collaborative approach. Ever since dangerous repression began in 2018, journalists have taken the habit of covering unrest in pools. "No reporter is able to cover any protest under police or paramilitary harassment alone," says Chamorro.

Instead, journalists team up to ensure they are never caught in a dangerous situation alone. Journalists fear being attacked and beaten. "You never know when you'll run into a fanatic," says Maynor Salazar, an investigative journalist who works at a new site called Divergentes. The Violeta Barrios de Chamorro Foundation, which advocates for the press in the country, counts 72 attacks in 2020 alone. Working in pools allows journalists to collect firsthand testimonials, important in a country with little reliable data collection.

The sense of collaboration extends to distribution as well. Chamorro explains that there is a "network of collaborative support among the Nicaraguan media to expand the scope of distribution." Local radio stations and media outlets share information that may have been repressed or ignored by mainstream outlets. This has allowed Confidencial to share some of its groundbreaking work in the past few months, including an investigation into the real numbers of Covid deaths in the country. Meanwhile, as the government has made little mention of the hurricanes battering the country, journalists like Salazar have been going out in pools to document its real damage. "We are filling a gap," he says. ■



BELARUS // from previous page

During the pandemic, the independent journalists were the only ones who provided facts about the disease, the scale of coronavirus. The state media and Lukashenko lied. State media ignored the protests, the mobilization, and this beautiful self-organization of people. Independent journalists were able to establish a connection with people. I travelled across the country before the election. People would approach independent journalists and say thank you for what we were doing. For the first time perhaps in years, and unlike in the rest of the world where trust in media has been weakening, we in Belarus have experienced this revival and trust in independent media. People consider us their allies.

We were arrested, threatened. We have had to run. This is even before the election. I was under surveillance a few times. You feel this huge responsibility to report, to show people inside the country but also people around the world what is happening. There are cases where journalists have been targeted with rubber bullets despite having identified themselves as press.

The strike by state television in August was rare. How did that come about?

The media strike came about during an unprecedented level of police brutality. Seven thousand people in a country of 9 million people got arrested in three days. They were tortured and beaten. Those journalists saw what was happening. They are also citizens. It became the last straw. So, many of them walked out then.

Having moved to a safe location, you now report remotely. How do you find sources?

The three-day internet shutdown immediately after the election was a huge blow to journalists. There was no wi-fi or mobile internet. We had to rely on VPN and other methods to circumvent the restrictions.

While I had been an eyewitness, now I have to rely on people who are on the streets, citizen journalists and eyewitnesses. People feel a sense of responsibility and film videos of wrongdoing and protests. They share information through Telegram channels. These videos are sent to the media. The journalists on the ground are in constant danger.

People are ready to share information with me. They have seen so much, experienced so much, suffered so much. People find contact information for journalists. Volunteers near detention centers contact people who are released and want to share their stories. Then these volunteers approach us. People don't want to talk to Russian or state propaganda media, so they ask journalists who they are working for.

I don't have any problem with people who want to remain anonymous. They are ready to show evidence so you can verify what they tell you. In Belarus, there are many reasons for people to be scared. People have died, have been found hanging from a tree, have been jailed, tortured, or died under unknown circumstances.

You've written about keeping Belarus in the international news cycle. What is the goal of your coverage?

I used to work for Belarusian national media and write for a Belarusian audience in Belarusian or Russian. Now I write in English so my stories are obviously directed at the international audience. I am trying to explain what people think, what has changed, and how and why society has changed. When people ask me am I surprised by the scale of what's happening, I say, well yes, I am surprised because it has been more than three months of protests. At the same time I am not surprised society has changed. I saw it months before the election when I travelled to small towns. People were politicized. They wanted a new and fair election. They did not talk about high salaries. They talked about political rights, human rights, about their voice being respected, and opinion being heard. This is a revolution of self-respect, dignity, justice, human rights, and political rights. When it is said Belarusians weren't protesting before [the election], that is not true. There was a massive protest three years ago that rocked the country beyond the capital. The evolution of this protest we are seeing now is the same kind of grassroots movement, bottomless and leaderless movement based on social media from then. Back then there was YouTube, Facebook, and VK, these were super popular. Now it is Telegram. Belarusians have been getting ready for change. They were coming step by step to this and there is no way back. This is a process. This is what makes it beautiful. This is not a sudden awakening of the nation. This is an evolution.

During the pandemic, civil society exploded. People were unified and they organized an alternative health-

care structure through crowdfunding to deliver help and protective equipment to hospitals across the country.

What have been some of your most memorable reporting experiences over the last few months?

One of the most beautiful moments in my career was this August when I was reporting after three of the darkest days in the modern history of Belarus, a time when stun grenades had exploded near our car and I was running from riot police. People were out on the streets. There were women with flowers. I talked to a woman who had this white flower in her hair and she gave it to me. "Thank you for your work," she said. She hugged me.

Another unforgettable instance happened in Minsk on August 10, after the election result was declared. It was during the internet shutdown. We were headed to the protests. There was a huge traffic jam in the city. People began playing music, dancing on the streets, honking their cars. Then we heard that riot police started this special operation and stun grenades were exploding near the Pushkinskaya metro station. This is when the first victim of the protests, Alyaksandr Taraykouski, was killed. We could hear shootings amidst the explosions of the stun grenades. In an instant, everyone around us fell silent. The music and the happiness disappeared. I remember the eyes of my fellow citizens, the silence. We knew Special Forces were perhaps being deployed. It's heartbreaking. These are peaceful people who want justice and who want a new fair and free election. Just that. ■

Nicaraguans outside of the Nicaraguan Embassy in San José, Costa Rica in January 2019 protest the arrest of opposition journalists Miguel Mora and Lucia Pineda

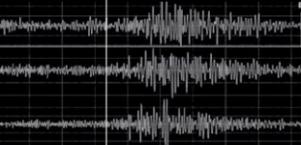


“GRAVEYARD OF DREAMS”

The August blast in Beirut's port has spurred a resurgence of accountability journalism in Lebanon

BY HABIB BATTAH

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PREVIOUS SPREAD: A helicopter puts out a fire at the scene of the devastating explosion in Beirut on August 4, 2020

ABOVE: A seismic signal from the Beirut blast, equivalent to a magnitude 3.3 earthquake, was recorded by the An-Najah National University in Palestine

even years before the largest explosion since Hiroshima obliterated a large part of the port of Beirut in August, claimed some 200 lives, and left some 300,000 homeless, port authorities who could have prevented the blast assaulted and detained investigative TV journalist Riad Kobaissi and his crew.

In 2013, Kobaissi had taken a bullhorn to the streets, calling out then head of Lebanese Customs, Chafic Merhi, who oversaw the entry of goods into the port, for refusing to be interviewed about allegations of smuggling and corruption. Minutes later, security agents tackled the cameraman, ripped the bullhorn from Kobaissi's hands, and kicked, punched, and dragged both men. The incident was broadcast live on air until Kobaissi and his crew disappeared into the Customs Office and were transferred to a high court.

Kobaissi works for Al Jadeed ("New TV"), one of the most popular channels in Lebanon, a pioneer in investigative reporting in the country. It's not uncommon for angry and armed supporters of the nation's opposing ruling parties to gather outside the station's headquarters to protest its critical coverage.

On that day in 2013, Al Jadeed replayed the assaults on a loop, and a crowd of a few hundred supporters gathered outside the court to protest, chanting "freedom" for several hours until the crew was released. When Kobaissi finally emerged, his face bruised, he proclaimed that he would continue to expose port chief Merhi's dealings. (Merhi was arrested in August in connection with the detonation of 2,750 metric tons of ammonium nitrate improperly stored in the port of Beirut.)

Kobaissi's defiance personified a boldness that has become increasingly common in Lebanese media, both on mainstream channels and at several new online media outlets that have flourished despite a state-backed crackdown on public expression.

With dozens of privately-owned news outlets, Lebanon's vibrant mediascape has long been seen as the freest in the Arab world, a region dominated by sycophantic, state-owned media. But this reputation has come under fire in recent years as several prominent journalists and activists faced defamation lawsuits and police interrogations. Meanwhile, hundreds of protesters have been detained during demonstrations that swept the country during an unprecedented street uprising that began last October. Several journalists covering the protests have also been attacked by security forces.

Even before the political turmoil began, some of the country's oldest and largest newspapers and broadcasters had either closed or scaled back in light of Lebanon's economic collapse, crippling an already tiny advertising market, worsened by Venezuela-style hyperinflation. But at the same time, a number of new media collectives and platforms have emerged and mainstream media, always dominated by political party-owned or -affiliated publications and broadcasters, have changed their fo-

cus. Lebanon's most popular TV stations have provided wall-to-wall coverage of the demonstrations, at times serving as an open mic platform for public grievances and protesters' attacks on the government. New nightly programs have emerged to investigate corruption and mismanagement, and there is an increasingly audacious attitude among many TV personalities. In August, a week after the port explosion, Wassim Oraby, a news anchor for the state-owned broadcaster Tele Liban, quit on air, voicing his disgust with the country's politicians who had transformed it into "a graveyard of dreams."

In politics and media, there are new norms of demanding accountability, supported by an increased focus on document-based research, citizen reporting, and digital distribution. The port tragedy has provided an opportunity to report on systemic issues — nepotism, cronyism, negligence, jurisdictional dysfunction emboldened by an atmosphere of public dissent. The protest movement, which saw tens of thousands fill squares in cities and villages across the country, was sparked by anger over new taxes. But it evolved into a rejection of decades of mismanagement by a regime blamed for daily power cuts, garbage piling up on the streets, a massive currency devaluation, soaring unemployment, and a lack of any political change among the oligarchy that has ruled Lebanon since the end of the civil war in 1990.

These former militia leaders, transformed into politicians and bankrolled by foreign powers, had long found a home on Lebanese television, where their speeches and conversations dominated the airwaves. Most outlets were owned by political parties or tied to party-aligned families as part of the division of spoils that helped end the war, and thus acted as rival propaganda machines. The polarization on the airwaves often takes a geopolitical tone, pitting Western-backed parties and their loyal stations against Iranian- and Syrian-backed ones.

Over the last decade, a handful of privately-owned and relatively independent news outlets began offering critical local reporting. This trend accelerated with the protests, particularly with Al Jadeed's investigative jour-

nalism program "Down with Corrupt Rule." The hour-long show has become much more popular following the catastrophic blast.

Through a series of live TV programs and documentaries, Al Jadeed spent the last several years reporting on smuggling and bribery that it alleges happens on a gigantic scale at the docks, often implicating the most elite members of society, using videos from hidden cameras. They present their journalism with flash, deploying shadowy lighting and suspenseful music.

Deep research underlies the presentation: hidden camera footage, recorded phone calls with politicians, reams of leaked official documents and correspondence, projected on screen, many handwritten, highlighted, and read out loud, often sarcastically. Face-to-face surprise street confrontations with port brokers and importers are also common. "We've been working a lot on storytelling to make sure we are reaching the vast majority of viewers," Kobaissi says. "It's not a matter of satire or criticism only; it's about delivering the message, which is an investigation based on evidence. Every culture has its own particularity, and this is efficient. It's not necessarily the best way, but it is an efficient way to deliver the message."

The Al Jadeed team's journalism has preceded several government investigations. Kobaissi says eight out of 16 customs brokers caught on hidden cameras have been prosecuted, but few, if any, have lost their jobs. It took the tragic August 4 explosion to get Merhi and more than two dozen other port officials arrested. Merhi's attorney says he denies any responsibility.

Yet months since the blast, only a handful of indictments, with few details, have been released to the public, despite promises by government officials to move swiftly. In contrast, hours after the explosion, the Al Jadeed team kicked into high gear, airing marathon programs revealing leaked internal letters that showcased widespread incompetence from multiple government agencies. They proved that officials had long known the dangers of the material sitting at the port, but failed to act.

It's not just Al Jadeed. Since the protests began in 2019, popular private news channels — such as Lebanon Broadcasting Corporation International (LBCI) and MTV Lebanon, famous for their well-produced talk shows and slick hosts welcoming the country's top politicians — made a sudden shift, providing wall-to-wall coverage of the rallies and encouraging viewers at home to join in, listing times and locations of upcoming protests.

Activist collectives have been organized around particular issues, such as digital rights or environmental destruction, and have themselves become publishers of news via their social media pages. Their release of leaked official reports and expert analyses have become a key source for journalists covering these stories.

By far the most journalistic of this new crop of social media publishers is Megaphone, which brands itself as the voice of the revolution. Its pop-y, short videos, distributed largely on Instagram and Facebook, range from exposing police brutality against activists to highlighting dubious financial transactions involving Lebanon's most powerful politicians and bankers. When anger boiled over in the wake of the port explosion, fueling violent



demonstrations near parliament, Megaphone News documented live fire used by security forces against protesters. Interviews with doctors who treated the patients and X-ray images revealed birdshot rounds embedded throughout their bodies.

Many of Megaphone's most viral videos are scathing rebukes of top leaders, particularly President Michel Aoun and his powerful son-in-law, former minister Gebran Bassil. "With every video we have this feeling that we are gambling," says Tariq Keblaoui, lead videographer and video editor at Megaphone. "Every time we say, 'Ok, this is the one that is going to get us arrested.' We think we will see the shabiha [thugs] coming," a reference to groups of vigilantes loyal to party leaders. Keblaoui says Megaphone has a policy of operating discreetly, not identifying themselves at protests, not revealing their office location, and not publishing bylines on the website.

Keblaoui is one of five full-timers and some 30 freelancers who produce Megaphone's coverage, which consists of a mixture of infographics and videos that offer detailed explanations of the current political crisis. The punchy mashups of text, photos, and archival footage are drawn largely from news articles and local television reports, produced by Al Jadeed and others, often buried in hours-long broadcasts. Megaphone pieces run four

Captured on live TV, investigative journalist Riad Kobaissi is assaulted by authorities after he used a megaphone to publicly call out the head of Lebanese Customs for corruption

PREVIOUS SPREAD: STR/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES SEISMOGRAPH, URBAN PLANNING AND DISASTER RISK REDUCTION CENTER AT AN-NAJAH NATIONAL UNIVERSITY, PALESTINE

AL JADEED

An injured journalist receives treatment after clashes between security forces and protesters in Beirut in January 2020. The clashes were part of ongoing protests against worsening economic conditions



to five minutes on average, with better editing and production values than most local television stations. The snappiness and shareability of the content, as well as the English subtitles, make it far more accessible to the Lebanese diaspora and a younger audience that does not watch much television. Most of Megaphone's staff, including Keblaoui, are under 30, and only a handful come from journalistic backgrounds.

Megaphone's posts regularly reach over 1 million viewers per week, and the majority of the audience is local, Keblaoui says. But a "very big portion" of the audience are expatriates. New platforms like Megaphone are reaching new audiences, says Omar Al-Ghazzi, assistant professor of media studies at the London School of Economics, who researches reporting and representation of conflict, "offering a younger generation, which has long been sidelined by traditional outlets, the opportunity to speak out and voice an opinion. It has a positive impact on the country in that new media and activists have found a place in a very rigid political system."

Taking on the powerful, including the banking industry, risks a loss of advertising revenue, a blow that is difficult for the struggling media industry to endure. However, Daraj Media, a Lebanese outlet launched in 2017 by veteran local journalists, remains fearless in its coverage of the banking sector.

One of the outlet's most viral videos, with reporting by well-known TV anchor Dima Sadek, covers Lebanon's central banker Riad Salame, claiming he moved \$2 billion out of the country with the help of accounts belonging to his brother and executive assistant. The claim, which Salame denies, is based on leaked documents and reporting that built upon the Panama Papers exposé. Daraj collaborated with the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project to reveal \$100 million worth of Salame's real estate holdings worldwide, at a time when the Lebanese lira has lost some 80% of its value and half the population has slipped into poverty.

Few broadcasters have questioned the courts' inability to demand accountability. "TV stations here are on excellent terms with the banks," says Alia Ibrahim, a Daraj founder who worked for years as a correspondent for Al Arabiya, one of the region's biggest TV networks, as well as at The Washington Post. Not only are the banks major advertisers, but they also sponsor the "business news" segments of local programs, she notes.

One of Daraj's earliest reports in 2018 investigated allegations of corruption involving the son of Lebanon's Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri. Weeks later, a truckload of heavily armed police surrounded Daraj's offices, apprehending Hazem al-Amin, editor-in-chief. There was no warrant, and no notification as to why or where he had been taken. Al-Amin was released three hours later, with no explanation. By this time, much of the local media had begun covering the story in solidarity. "If they were trying to send us a warning, they also found it's a headache for them," Ibrahim says. Berri denied he sent police to raid Daraj.

Even though arrests of journalists in Lebanon remain rare, intimidation can take many forms. Beyond violent confrontations, threats and lawsuits have become politi-

cians' leading weapons, with dozens of journalists and activists recently drawn into court proceedings that can span years. Authorities have used the antiquated legal system to their advantage, as defamation cases are tried in criminal courts that can carry hefty fines and jail sentences.

Sadek is emblematic of the about-face that some journalists in Lebanon have made. She began her career as anchor of OTV, one of Lebanon's leading broadcast stations, which acts largely as a communication arm of President Aoun's political party. Later, at privately-owned LBCI, she was the host of a reality-style show similar to the American "Carpool Karaoke," except instead of celebrity sing-alongs she took some of the country's top politicians for a ride to talk politics. Like much of the coverage of politicians on Lebanese TV, the in-car conversations were often full of laughter.

It is precisely this cushy relationship between journalists and politicians that has fueled public anger with the media.

Things changed after the uprising began. "Journalists in Lebanon unconsciously turned into activists," Sadek says. In 2019 during the height of protests, she participated in rallies and attacked the president and his party on Twitter. After LBCI station management limited her on-air appearances, she resigned.

Funding for media outlets remains a challenge, one complicated by the pandemic and global instability. New media upstarts such as Megaphone and Daraj largely rely on grants from Western media funds associated with European governments, particularly Germany and France. Both outlets say they retain editorial control. "Unless you are financially independent, your journalism is always somewhat compromised," says Daraj's Ibrahim. In order to wean the site off grants, she says, Daraj is exploring an advertising alliance with other independent media outlets in the region, such as Megaphone and Mada Masr in Egypt, as well as looking toward a publicly funded membership model.

Some industry veterans worry about sustainability. Sami Kleib, a veteran of Al Jazeera and Lebanese television, left Al Mayadeen TV, a channel seen as leaning toward Iran, in late 2019. Like Sadek, Kleib now broadcasts on Facebook and YouTube. He is wary about the future of journalism in the country. Funding continues to dictate editorial direction, particularly in such a small advertising market, where local media are forced to rely on foreign donors. The media environment thus reflects the broader political vulnerability of the Lebanese state, torn between U.S. and Saudi interests on the one hand and Iran and its allies on the other. Private channels "must sacrifice objectivity to meet their owners' interest," Kleib says.

Indeed, pro-uprising private channels, such as Al Jadeed, LBCI, and MTV, which are primarily owned by wealthy businessmen, devote copious amounts of live airtime to the speeches of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah yet also run overtly propagandistic material produced by the U.S. embassy. U.S. government officials, in turn, walk a tightrope on Lebanon, recently voicing support for the protesters yet having backed Lebanese politicians for decades.

HUSSAM CHERARO/ANADOLU AGENCY VIA GETTY IMAGES

Apart from the financial challenges, polarization can be felt on the streets. Just as vigilantes have attacked pro-uprising reporters, TV crews from OTV and Al-Manar, owned and operated by Hezbollah, have been heckled or physically attacked by protesters while covering rallies. In one incident, OTV reporter Rima Hamdan used her microphone to swat at protesters who had been taunting and cursing her while doing a live shot standup. She says the expletives had crossed the line to misogyny and sexual harassment, a complaint voiced by female reporters on both ends of the political spectrum. "There is no such thing as absolute press freedom," she says. "The press is always owned by either governments or corporations or advertisers. Of course, you can never criticize the channel's owners" if you work there.

Hamdan claims some activists are supported by Western-backed Lebanese parties, which have sometimes joined protests. Some protesters have even alleged that ruling parties have sent supporters to rallies to instigate violence, a claim echoed by the U.N. representative in Lebanon.

There are also credible fears among many journalists and activists that foreign powers are attempting to co-opt the uprising. While Saudi Arabia and Iran are funding local media and relief organizations, Western states are heavily invested in soft power initiatives of their own, which have only intensified since protests began in 2019. Former colonial power France has promised to negotiate a "new political pact" in line with protest demands and announced new investments in French-speaking Lebanese schools. Meanwhile, U.S. Under Secretary of State David Hale told Congress that the U.S. had spent billions on military aid as well as non-government organizations, some of which have been influential in media training and protest organizing. The U.S. has also sanctioned several leading Lebanese politicians affiliated with Hezbollah over alleged corruption charges. These American foreign

policy moves were covered widely in local media and celebrated by many uprising-related social accounts. However, Western-allied politicians who have served in Lebanese governments for decades have escaped such accountability measures. Some feel that policy bias is producing subtle media influences.

New media outlets like Megaphone are "objective in the stories they cover, but they are also selective," says Jean Aziz, a former news director at OTV. He claims there is a preponderance of scrutiny on pro-Iran figures and far fewer posts on pro-U.S. or pro-Saudi ones, equally to blame for the current crisis. But Aziz, who left OTV even before the protests in 2019, applauds the overall trend toward investigative reporting.

According to the LSE's Al-Ghazzi, investigations like those of Kobaissi have been solid but their impact has been limited: "There is an assumption that exposing corruption and criminality would lead to accountability. In Lebanon, investigative journalists find themselves facing institutional animosity, and so a lot of what they find floats like a bubble in the public sphere rather than gaining momentum for change."

The colorful language and dramatic confrontations deployed by new media outlets raise questions of objectivity for some Western analysts. Al Jadeed's Kobaissi bristles at the suggestion: "What, was the BBC impartial when the Nazis were bombing London? Were the Americans impartial in their coverage of the Iraq War? We don't have enough activists, so sometimes you have to take your investigations to an activist level. People need to see someone who is challenging decadent, corrupt people."

"It's activism in that it's challenging the powers that be, the political elite, the establishment," Megaphone's Keblaoui says. "Many political parties would love to see us silenced, and that's where it becomes activism. Freedom of speech is not a given. It's constantly challenged, and we are really pushing it to the edge." ■

"With every video we have this feeling that we are gambling. Every time we say: 'OK, this is the one that is going to get us arrested'"

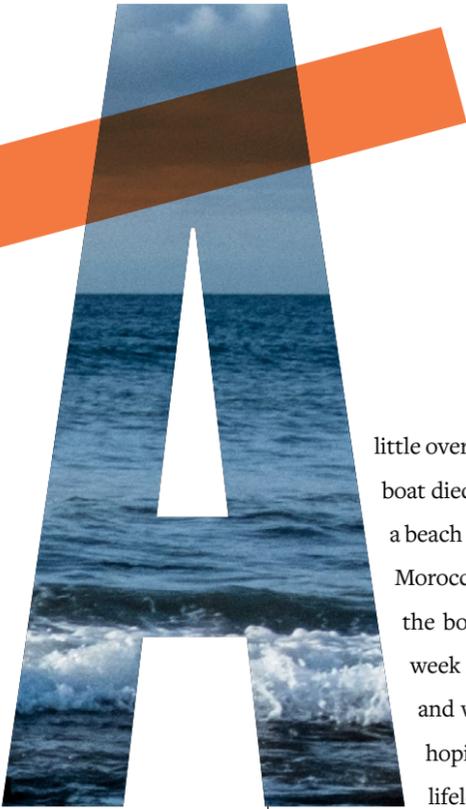
TARIQ KEBLAOUI,
MEGAPHONE



“THERE IS
ALMOST
NO FREE PRESS
LEFT”

Despite a state-backed
crackdown, some
Moroccan journalists
still manage to do
independent reporting

BY AIDA ALAMI



little over a year ago, 45 people in an inflatable boat died at sea trying to cross to Spain from a beach north of the city of Casablanca along Morocco's Atlantic shore. More than half of the bodies were not recovered. But for a week following the wreckage, families sat and waited on the beaches, weeping and hoping that the waves would wash in the lifeless bodies of their loved ones.

Tragedies like these are far too common in Morocco, a country that has long been a departing point for clandestine crossings to Europe. Tighter border security and increased patrolling in the north have forced people into taking greater chances and more dangerous crossings, such as to the Canary Islands off Morocco's Atlantic coast.

The general public has long become inured to such unfortunate events, and the media narrative has recently focused mostly on sub-Saharan migration since fewer Moroccans try to illegally cross today compared to a couple of decades ago. The lives lost could have been just one more passing story about the deaths of anonymous travelers in pursuit of better lives elsewhere, but Casablanca-based reporter Salahedine Lemaizi viewed the deaths as newsworthy.

He forced the public to acknowledge their lack of fortune, their desperation, and the reasons that motivate so many to gamble with their lives. In a series of gut-wrenching stories chronicling their lives and deaths published in the local newspaper *Les Éco*, Lemaizi explained what it was like to live in a small desolate village before making the decision to try to reach Europe, a decision that may lead to death.

He covered the burials, interviewed the families and neighbors, and produced reports that illustrated the efforts of a community to deal with the cruelty of such tragic deaths. His stories showed the absence of the state in large parts of the North African kingdom, where unemployment among youth is high and poverty is rampant. He showed how the community could only

rely on its members due to the government's failure to provide jobs and other aid to rural areas; with such meager resources, farmers often have little choice but to leave at any cost.

"It was hard. It was very hard," Lemaizi says. "I wanted to chronicle their despair. I wanted to show how a state disappears during crises like this."

These days, stories like Lemaizi's seem increasingly impossible. Press freedom advocates have denounced a steady decline in rights over the last few years. Despite the risks, some journalists are still managing to do courageous independent work. Lemaizi remains one of the last journalists in Morocco who produces strong reporting in a climate of fear and repression.

It comes at a high cost. When producing critical reporting, journalists have learned to stay attentive to how the authorities react, monitoring trolls on social media and websites that defame them, as indicators of the repressive measures that could come their way. Defamation websites, created with the backing of the regime, routinely send out warnings to journalists about what's to come. Press freedom watchdogs have also chronicled consistent attacks on reporters who are perceived as too independent or too critical of the state. The press freedom watchdog Reporters Without Borders (RSF) ranks Morocco 133 out of 180 countries in its 2020 index and repeatedly denounces the judicial harassment of independent journalists and harsh prison sentences based on trumped-up charges.

These attacks have created a climate of fear, contributed to character assassination, and then made flimsy prosecutions more believable to the general public, press freedom advocates say. Recently the authorities have taken a new approach to silence critical voices. Convicting journalists of sex crimes is becoming a huge deterrent for the few remaining reporters who are still in the profession and not in jail.

The country's press code was changed in 2016 to abolish prison sentences for journalistic offenses. Instead, human rights defenders say, the penal code has been used increasingly to punish critical journalists for alleged offenses seemingly unrelated to their work. As a result, a number of journalists have been arrested and charged with sex crimes. Under Morocco's conservative criminal code, sex outside of marriage is illegal.

According to Aboubakr Jamaï, former publisher and founder of *Le Journal Hebdomadaire* ("The Weekly Journal"), a magazine created in 1997 that was shut down by the authorities in 2010, advertisers are routinely pressured to boycott journalists and publications that are too critical, eventually giving them a "fatal blow."

"What remains today are isolated brave journalists who carry the torch of independent journalism," he says. "They dare to investigate and criticize the power elites, especially the monarchy and its security apparatus. Their meager resources are often provided by international NGOs, which lead the regime to label them as traitors. After economically destroying independent journalism, the regime is now attacking independent journalists' moral integrity by levying bogus depravity charges. It is opportunistically surfing the #MeToo



wave" because foreign NGOs will shy away from supporting a journalist accused of rape.

Akhbar Alyaoum ("Today's News" in Arabic), an Arabic opposition paper and perhaps the only publication with no self-imposed censorship, has had its share of run-ins with the authorities. Three of its journalists have been convicted or arrested on charges related to sex crimes. Its former publisher Taoufik Bouachrine was sentenced to 15 years in prison for human trafficking and rape. He has denied the charges. The paper's current editor Soulaïman Raïssouni is in jail awaiting trial on a charge of rape. Christopher Deloire, RSF secretary-general, in a tweet said Raïssouni is a "victim of a defamation campaign created by the digital media close to state services." And a former journalist, Hajar Raïssouni, was convicted of having premarital sex and an abortion, both of which are illegal in Morocco. She denied the charges. She was later pardoned by King Mohammed VI following an international campaign. Another Akhbar Alyaoum employee alleged in a Washington Post op-ed that she was forced to testify against her former boss and wrote that she is skeptical of the rape charges against Omar Radi, another high-profile reporter, currently also facing charges of spying. Radi's lawyers have denied all the charges against him, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ).

Hajar Raïssouni has since moved to Sudan, her husband's home country, despite Sudan's dire economic situation and unstable political climate. "The harassment

of my family did not stop after the royal pardon," she says. "Defamation and surveillance never stopped, and I found myself in fear of getting convicted in a new case."

That sentiment is echoed by Hicham Mansouri, an investigative reporter now exiled in France, sentenced to 10 months in jail on a 2015 charge of adultery after a trial that was widely denounced by international press freedom organizations. Mansouri, who denies the charges, claimed that the police set him up and fabricated evidence of adultery, according to Human Rights Watch.

As Raïssouni notes, surveillance is common in Morocco. In recent months Amnesty International released a report documenting the sophisticated spying on a journalist and human rights advocates. Government spokespeople strongly pushed back, saying the Amnesty International claims were unfounded.

In addition to being targeted with sex crime charges and surveillance, independent publications that heavily depend on ad revenue have struggled to survive in a climate where advertising has been reduced in an attempt to control the content they publish. The economic model for the existing outlets is complicated. If they are not state-owned, many news outlets are owned or controlled by powerful figures close to the King. A well-controlled system of ownership ensures control and co-optation and makes independent journalism almost impossible to produce. Freelancers end up bearing the burden to elevate certain stories. A handful of news

PREVIOUS SPREAD: A wooden boat used by Moroccan migrants is seen at the coast of Spain's Canary Islands

ABOVE: Hamid Lomani and his daughter pictured in their village of Si Abdikar, Morocco. Lomani's son Aziz was one of 45 who drowned while crossing the Atlantic to Spain in September 2019

PREVIOUS SPREAD: JAVIER BAULUZ/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS
RYLEY GRAHAM



Hajar Raissouni, right, is greeted upon her release from prison in Sale, Morocco in 2019. She was convicted of having an abortion, which is illegal in Morocco. Activists consider her imprisonment an effort to repress independent reporters

“Morocco’s 2020 media scene is widely occupied by mouthpieces of the regime, websites that have close and troubling ties with security services, and are focused on character-assassinating critics”

AHMED BENCHEMSI
MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA COMMUNICATIONS
DIRECTOR FOR HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

websites have been able to survive with some advertising revenue.

“It was already difficult before with fragile economic models, weak readership, and politicized public and advertising subsidies,” Mansouri says. “It is all the more so today with this climate of self-censorship and censorship due, among other things, to recent trials and harsh convictions. The only ‘prosperous’ media out there right now are the regime’s libel media [websites that specialize in maligning critics of the government] that have proliferated.”

The situation wasn’t always so dire. In the late 1990s, the late King Hassan II encouraged a freer media space, which resulted in the creation of independent publications that strongly criticized those in power and challenged most red lines. In the 2000s, after the ascension of King Mohammed VI to the throne in 1999, some journalists were prosecuted, mostly for defamation, but there was still a relatively free space for them to express themselves. In 2011, as pro-democracy protests swept the Arab world, the Moroccan king gave up some power and made some political concessions.

But observers see a clear deterioration in recent years.

“The level of freedom in Morocco’s media nowadays is incomparably lower than 10 or 15 years ago,” says Ahmed Benchemsi, Middle East and North Africa communications director for Human Rights Watch and founder and former publisher of the Moroccan weekly magazines *TelQuel* and *Nishan*. “Back then, the independent press was facing serious difficulties but at

least it was still alive and able to put up a fight that was not completely lopsided. Back then, the support of international watchdogs when journalists were arrested or free outlets were on trial meant something, and often gave pause to the authorities’ efforts to suppress free speech.”

According to Benchemsi, Morocco’s media landscape has completely changed. “There is almost no free press left,” he says. “Morocco’s 2020 media scene is widely occupied by mouthpieces of the regime, websites that have close and troubling ties with security services, and are focused on character-assassinating critics.”

Many independent journalists feel that they are left with little choice: follow the official line or face dangerous consequences. Another journalist, Imad Stitou, testified to the police in defense of Omar Radi concerning a

rape allegation against him. Stitou now may face charges for complicity in the rape; press freedom watchdogs view that possibility as pressure for him to withdraw his support for Radi. “Today, I feel incapable of doing my job,” Stitou says. “Two colleagues and friends [Radi and Soulaïman Raïssouni, editor of the Arabic-language daily *Akhbar Alyaoum*] are now in jail because they dared saying things, because they had the courage to defy red lines.” Soulaïman Raïssouni, the uncle of Hajar Raïssouni, wrote frequent editorials extremely critical of the authorities, while Radi was doing research on land expropriation and for years documented human rights abuses.

Imad Stitou, whose childhood dream was to become a reporter, has worked for local and foreign publications, print and digital, in the hope of finding an outlet that would let him freely practice his profession. At the moment, with the serious charges he may face, he prefers to pause before thinking of a next step. “Today, we can still talk about elections and economic recovery and criticize the government that does not govern,” he says, referring to the king and his advisers’ tight control of the political system. “We try to choose an outlet that will not censor us, or less than the others. We know what the red lines are, and we try to play with these red lines. We used to know what they were but it has now become complicated as we see new red lines every day.”

Morocco’s “red lines,” or forbidden subjects, according to Human Rights Watch, include Islam, the monarchy, the king and other members of the royal family, and the country’s “territorial integrity,” which is usually but not exclusively applied to Morocco’s claim of sovereignty over Western Sahara.

Still, Lemaizi and the few other remaining free voices in Morocco are undeterred. Some reporters, mostly freelancers or correspondents for international news agencies, manage to do their work while avoiding trouble.

Nour El Hoda Bouajaj works for *Lakome*, a digital news outlet run by Ali Anouzla, who since 2013 has been awaiting trial on a charge of “promoting terrorism” — a charge that RSF, CPJ, and a host of other human rights organizations have denounced as baseless.

Anouzla has been keeping a lower profile — covering foreign countries and uncontroversial stories in Morocco — to survive in the business and stay out of jail. “We are all scared; there isn’t currently any Moroccan journalist that isn’t scared, aside from those that work for publications that are close to the authorities,” Bouajaj says. “Many just are thinking about migrating.”

Working conditions remain difficult. Some of the outlets that manage to produce good journalism — *Médias24*, *Yabiladi* — mostly focus on local news, conducting investigations on migration, crime, and other topics within the red lines. Being discreet has also been the secret to their ability to continue doing good work without getting into much trouble. In recent years, *Médias24* did a series of meticulous articles about the light sentences meted out to sexual offenders. *Yabiladi* has delved into complex migration stories, such as the exploitation of Moroccan female workers on strawberry farms in southern Spain, shedding light on sexual abuse allegations that had gone unnoticed.



Journalist Omar Radi waits outside a courthouse in Casablanca, Morocco in March 2020. The outspoken activist faces charges of espionage and rape, both of which he denies

Akhbar Alyaoum has provided its readers with consistent and hard-hitting critical news and political commentary. The daily paper’s editor, Soulaïman Raïssouni, now in jail, spoke critically of the monarchy and of the King’s entourage — something that is almost nonexistent today in other outlets.

Lemaizi, the Casablanca-based journalist who wrote the series about lives lost during migration, explains that after years of trying to separate his political activism and journalism, he’s finally embraced advocacy journalism. He studied political science at the University of Montreal and then moved back to Morocco in 2005 to study journalism. He has worked for several outlets, tried to start a communication company (a short-lived venture), and then worked as a staffer for a business newspaper that he left last February.

Working for a business paper, he wasn’t allowed to report anything negative about companies that were essential to the outlet’s revenues. “When I specialized in migration issues, I couldn’t imagine working on other topics because there was so much I could cover,” he says. “I was interested in different kinds of stories, business stories, but I couldn’t dig deep. It became a rational choice to avoid censorship. If you have to be in a precarious financial situation, you might as well be without losing face.”

The father of one decided that working at a relatively low-paying job and sacrificing a lot of his family time wasn’t worth it, so he resigned his staff job and decided to develop an entrepreneurial media outlet with his wife, also a journalist. He started the Moroccan Network of Migration Journalists, with about 50 reporters in Morocco and abroad, to better cover migration issues, support each other, and develop a space for creation and debate. He plans to apply for grants and figure out a way other than accepting advertising to sustain his publication.

“I am interested in workers, I am interested in migrants. I am interested in the voiceless,” he says. “That is what the outlet will be about.” ■

FADEL SENNA/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES
OPPOSITE: YOUSSEF BOUJLAL/REUTERS

1976

Dale Burk died at his home in Stevensville, Montana on September 16. He was 83. His reporting for The Missoulian on mismanagement by the U.S. Forest Service in favor of the timber industry and with disregard for wildlife helped spur passage of the National Forest Management Act in 1976.

2006

Mary C. Curtis is the host of a new podcast, CQ Roll Call's "Equal Time with Mary C. Curtis."

2008

Stuart Watson's memoir, "What She Said & What I Heard: How One Man Shut Up and Started Listening," was published by Spark in October.

2009

Hannah Allam has joined The Washington Post's national

security team, covering domestic terrorism.

David Jackson has joined the Better Government Association, which uses reporting and policy advocacy to fight for accountability in Illinois government, as a senior investigative reporter.

2011

Tony Bartelme is a member of the Post and Courier team that won a Society of Environmental Journalists Award for Reporting on the Environment for their series "Our Secret Delta."

2012

John Nery, the winner of the Award for Excellence in Opinion Writing from the Society of Publishers in Asia, was recognized for his work at the Philippine Daily Inquirer.

Samiha Shafy has joined Germany's Zeit on the politics team, based in Hamburg.

2013

Finbarr O'Reilly has won an Emmy for Outstanding Video Journalism: News for the Frontline documentary "Ebola in Congo."

2014

Tina Pamintuan, general manager of KALW in San Francisco, has joined NPR's board of directors.

2017

Tyler Dukes has joined the investigative reporting team at the (Raleigh, North Carolina) News & Observer.

2018

Glenda Gloria has assumed the role of executive editor of Rappler, a leading online news site in the Philippines. She was previously managing editor.

Michael Petrou is the new editor-in-chief of Open Canada, an international affairs publication from the Canadian International Council.

Christine Mungai is the lead curator of Baraza Media Lab, a co-creation space in Nairobi supporting Kenyan media.

2019

Anica Butler is The Boston Globe's new deputy managing editor for local news.

Peter Nickeas has joined CNN as a senior writer covering policing. Nickeas previously covered crime for the Chicago Tribune.

2020

Robert Chaney is the author of "The Grizzly in the Driveway: The Return of Bears to a Crowded American West," published by the University of Washington Press in January.

Oliver Roeder has won a Silver Grant for Work in Progress, from the Robert B. Silvers Foundation, to support work on "Play: The Games That Make Us Human," slated to be published by Norton in 2021.

2021 Nieman Visiting Fellows tackle racial justice and public health journalism

In response to the pandemic and racial injustice in the U.S., 12 innovative media professionals have been selected for focused project work as 2021 Nieman Visiting Fellows. The fellows, working remotely, will each spend time using Nieman and Harvard resources to develop projects advancing racial justice or improving public health journalism.

The 2021 Visiting Nieman Fellows and their study plans:



Janet Alvarez, deputy business editor of The Philadelphia Inquirer, will develop Covid-19 vaccination education initiatives to inform

people of color when vaccines are distributed. The goal is to assist vulnerable populations, especially the undocumented.



Tamara Best, a member of the Facebook news team, will research how a centralized hub within a social media platform can be utilized to amplify stories of under-represented communities and create avenues for engagement to advance racial justice.



Jasmine Brown, a senior producer in the race and culture unit at "ABC World News Tonight" will work to

amplify the voices of people of color in U.S. newsrooms by developing two crowd-sourced databases — one helping reporters find diverse sources, and the other a directory of newsroom staff to be shared with hiring managers — for Diversifying Journalism. Brown created the project with her 2020 Nieman Fellow colleagues Ana Campoy and Selymar Colón.



Aaron Eaton, a digital coordinator and video producer at The Philadelphia Tribune, will study and report on the impact that virtual learning has on low-income students with limited or no access to resources in the

School District of Philadelphia.



Kyle Edwards, managing editor for Native News Online, will examine, catalog, and memorialize the loss of Indigenous elders, knowledge, and culture during the Covid-19 pandemic by creating a website devoted to sharing oral histories and interviews with affected families. This will inform a podcast focused on stories of Indigenous resilience.



Valeria Fernández, an independent investigative journalist, will work with journalist Maritza L.

"Enormous energy and a nearly equal capacity for empathy" 2011 Nieman Fellows reflect on Deb Price, a trailblazer who left her D.C. beat to move to Asia for the story of China's rise



Deb Price, 62, died in Hong Kong on November 20, 2020 after a long battle with an autoimmune lung disease. The many news outlets she had worked for include The Detroit News, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, South China Morning Post, and the Beijing-based Caixin Global.

It was at the Post that she met Joyce Murdoch, her partner of 35 years whom she married in Toronto in 2003. They wrote two books together: "And Say Hi to Joyce: America's First Gay Column Comes Out" and "Courting Justice: Gay Men and Lesbians v. the Supreme Court."

As classmates grappled with the news, they shared memories. Joshua Prager

writes, "For all Deb had accomplished, she had no airs about her, no pretensions. She recommended that we invite as seminar speakers Kitty Kelley and Stephen King." Michael Fitzgerald remembers her "enormous energy and nearly equal capacity for empathy."

Those characteristics were hallmarks of her time as deputy chief of The Detroit News Washington, D.C. bureau. In 1992, she lobbied to take on more work when she pitched the idea of writing a weekly column about gay issues. Bob Giles, then the paper's editor, approved the idea. "The prototypes I read struck a good

tone," he writes. "They were educational and occasionally conveyed a touch of humor." She was the first nationally syndicated columnist on gay life, bringing her perspective as a lesbian to mainstream America. Hate mail rolled in immediately. Fitzgerald notes, "She had to have thick skin, but she wasn't cynical about people; in my experience, she wanted to lift up everyone around her."

About 900 columns and 18 years later, Giles, then the curator at the Nieman Foundation, selected her to be a Nieman Fellow. At Harvard, she immersed herself in learning Chinese and studying China's history and politics. Helen Branswell recalls, "We can at times become a bit cynical, a bit 'I've seen this before.' But Deb had almost a child-like capacity to ... revel in her good fortune at having the opportunity to observe a piece of history unfolding. She also had the courage to make those opportunities happen. At a point where she was well-established in her career as a political reporter in Washington, Deb — along with Joyce Murdoch, her wife and willing partner in adventure — moved to Asia to reinvent herself and explore and conquer a new field, business reporting, about which she was passionate and at which she excelled." ■

Félix to co-create a Spanish-language podcast and outreach project ("Comadres al Aire"/"Comadres on the Air") that will address women's health issues (including those of queer, trans, and non-binary people) in Latinx immigrant communities in the U.S.



Alice Goldfarb, who leads the COVID Racial Data Tracker for The Atlantic's COVID Tracking Project, will research and develop guidance for analyzing and reporting on demographic data about public health, focusing on Covid-19 race and ethnicity data.

them to mainstream media.



Bethany Mollenkoff, a photographer and filmmaker, will create a photo series documenting the toll Covid-19 is taking on Black life in the rural South, where Black people are contracting the virus at a higher rate and dying from it more often than others elsewhere. The work will examine how the coronavirus is affecting people's mental health and fundamentally changing communities.

outlets are affected by loss of ad revenue due to the Covid-19 pandemic. He will explore new revenue models that these platforms can implement to continue essential journalism by, about, and for underrepresented communities.



Sarah Glover, manager of social media strategy for NBC Owned Television Stations, will create SPARK, an open-source project that will develop actionable diversity, equity, and inclusion proposals for the journalism industry. She plans to publish a series of articles to provide news leaders with business strategies that focus on dismantling bias and promote inclusive content, and she will also present workforce solutions and trainings.



S. Mitra Kalita, founder and publisher of several niche newsletters, including Epicenter-NYC — created to help New Yorkers get through the pandemic — will work with Black and Brown community media to create a content-sharing and revenue-generating network. The initiative will help journalists of color work together to amplify their stories and syndicate



Jonathan Rabb, CEO and founder of Watch The Yard, a digital platform for Black college students and alumni, will examine the ways in which minority-owned news



Anjali Sastry, an audio producer for the NPR podcast and national radio show "It's Been a Minute with Sam Sanders," will craft a two-pronged approach to increase diversity within public radio. On air, she will launch a new audio project to elevate voices of color across NPR radio shows, podcasts, and visual platforms. Behind the scenes, Sastry will create a model for mentorship programs that foster retention and support employees of color throughout public radio.

PHOTO OF DEB PRICE BY RICHARD A. BLOOM/NATIONAL JOURNAL

Beyond Superheroes Vs. Villains

Journalists must play a role in bridging the divides in our political discourse

BY AUSTIN BOGUES

As a kid I loved Superman. The undisputed good guy, he saved the world. Superhero and comic book movies often showcase easy-to-understand stakes, protagonists, and antagonists, making villains and heroes obvious.

Depending on how you view the world, for many people, either the superhero or the villain won the presidential election. Everyone's villain is the superhero in somebody's narrative.

Life is often more complex, but during the course of my 14 years as a reporter, I have found that we the people try to simplify the narrative when we talk about issues affecting our national political discourse, even at the local level.

The late House Speaker Tip O'Neill once said "all politics is local." But the 2020 corollary might find that local politics and issues are becoming nationally politicized.

For years, a casual scroll of user-generated comments on the social media platforms of most news outlets has shown people very angry on a whole range of issues, many of which don't have a direct impact on their local area.

When I worked as a reporter at the Williamsburg-based Virginia Gazette, my hometown paper, there was a small contingent of conservative activists who would get up to speak at local public meetings about national politics, sometimes going on at length about different right-wing conspiracy theories of the time. There was talk about Human Agenda 21, a convoluted supposed U.N. plot to implement socialist policies in the United States. Others ranted about Common Core and national education plans.

Later when I covered Asbury Park, a storied New Jersey city sung about in



Bruce Springsteen songs, the political environment couldn't have been more different.

Filled with progressive activists, the local meetings at times sounded like a social justice alphabet soup. Once, a well-meaning white progressive activist was explaining to me, a Black man from the South, the history of racial oppression against Black people in the United States and he kept looking at me hard as if I didn't understand the totality of the problem.

But for all the difference between the right-wing activists in James City County, Virginia, and the progressive ones in Asbury Park, New Jersey, I couldn't help but notice they had something in common: An aggressive belief that not only were



Journalists can help bridge the divides in our national discourse, finding the bonds that unite

their viewpoints the only right ones, but the "other side" was ultimately leading to the destruction of the country they held dear. The message and politics might have been different, but the rhetoric, distrust, and vilification was the same. It would seem like you were tuning into a mini version of MSNBC or Fox News.

A recent study showed that when local news outlets scale back, creating news deserts, it leads to increased polarization in the communities.

In conversations I've had with a range of political scientists, commentators, and pundits across the political spectrum during my time as a Nieman Fellow, nearly all have pointed out that American society is retreating into spaces that reinforce whatever narrative we prefer.

David French, a conservative writer who is a senior editor of *The Dispatch*, said American communities are increasingly separated by politics.

"We're clustering geographically by politics," said French, who recently authored the book *"Divided We Fall"* which examines polarization and divisions in American society. "So we are decreasingly likely to live around people who have a different point of view from us."

Furthering the divide is today's à la carte news consumer environment in which we get a range of options for news analysis and infotainment services that cater to our personal beliefs. With that and the ever increasing competition for eyeballs and time, it's hard to break through and have a tough conversation about what life might be like for people outside of our own echo chamber.

This is the one of the key avenues where I believe journalists can play a part in bridging the divides in our discourse.

We can be the voices of disparate communities, we can get to know people who at a glance may have nothing in common with each other, but we can find the bonds that unite. It's a chance to paint a portrait that's more in-depth than the caricatures and conventional narratives that you might see in a superhero story. Capturing people, policy issues, and political figures in all their nuance, complexity, flaws, and strengths will lead to a better conversation at the national and local levels. ■

Austin Bogues, a 2021 Nieman Fellow, is a reporter at the Asbury Park Press, part of USA TODAY NETWORK



AFTERIMAGE

"This story for National Geographic magazine was about women gaining political power across the world. Here, in New Zealand, young Maori women stood alongside the New Zealand prime minister, who is a woman, and several Maori women who are political leaders in a ceremony called Waitangi. I couldn't help thinking about how representation echoes through generations, multiplying possibilities. I could almost hear these young women saying 'I can do that.'"

Andrea Bruce, photojournalist and a 2016 Nieman Fellow

NiemanReports

The Newsrooms We Need Now

The series on how newsrooms must respond to the challenges of the moment continues online with new essays. Los Angeles Times editorial page editor Sewell Chan examines how newsrooms need to reckon with their past to move forward on racial equity, while Mary C. Curtis, NF '06, writes about fully and accurately reporting on Black women, who have too often been stereotyped and ignored.

NiemanLab

Google's New Tools for Journos

Reporters have always turned to Google for help, and now Google's offering a collection of tools made just for journalists. Nieman Lab takes a look at the recently launched Journalist Studio, which Google says is made to help reporters do their work "more efficiently, creatively, and securely." One of the tools, Pinpoint, uses AI and machine learning to help reporters sift through investigative materials.

NiemanStoryboard

The Pivot

In a new occasional series, Nieman Storyboard is interviewing journalists of various positions, platforms, and ages about where they landed after their career plans were derailed in some way — and what lessons they learned along the way. In the first installment, National Magazine Award winner Chris Jones shares his journey through the industry's disruption, from newspapers and *Esquire* to job loss and Netflix.

