

# Nieman

# REDRAWING THE LINE



**HOW COVERAGE OF THE POLICE IS CHANGING,  
FROM CROWDSOURCED INVESTIGATIONS TO CENTERING VICTIM ACCOUNTS**

**CBS NEWS' WESLEY LOWERY: REFEREE THE PROCESS  
KANSAS CITY STAR: RECKONING WITH THE PAST  
BOSTON GLOBE: CHANGING CRIMINAL JUSTICE REPORTING  
SOURCE DIVERSITY AND INCLUSIVE JOURNALISM**

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**Adeshina Emmanuel** (page 18) is the editor-in-chief at Injustice Watch, a nonprofit investigative newsroom based in Chicago. His work over the past decade has spanned hyperlocal and national reporting with a focus on race, class, and institutional injustice. Emmanuel previously was an education reporter at Chalkbeat, an investigative reporter at the Chicago Reporter, and a neighborhood reporter at DNAinfo Chicago. He also worked on the breaking news wire at the Chicago Sun-Times before interning at The New York Times in 2012 at the start of his career. He was born and raised in the Uptown neighborhood on Chicago’s North Side by an African-American mother and Nigerian father and studied journalism at Loyola University Chicago.



**Mará Rose Williams** (page 28) is an award-winning education writer for The Kansas City Star, where she has worked for more than 20 years. A graduate of the Ohio

University Scripps School of Journalism, Williams has worked as a reporter for four other newspapers, including Newsday and The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. She’s written on the 2015 Black student protests at the University of Missouri and that year won a Gerald M. Loeb Award for uncovering college rankings fraud at the University of Missouri-Kansas City.



**Jason Tuohey** (page 30) is the managing editor for digital at The Boston Globe, where he’s edited BostonGlobe.com since the site launched in 2011. Under his leadership, the news site has received numerous honors, including the Society of Newspaper Design’s “Word’s Best Website” award and the 2014 Pulitzer in Breaking News Reporting for coverage of the Boston Marathon bombings.



**Melba Newsome** (page 32) is an award-winning health and education journalist. She is a 2020 Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting grantee and a 2020 Reynolds Journalism Institute Fellow.



**Rachel Ramirez** (page 34) is an independent journalist covering environmental justice, race, and climate. She was born and raised in Saipan, Northern Mariana Islands, but is currently based in New York City. You can find her work in Vox, HuffPost, Grist, The Guardian, Rolling Stone, Mother Jones, and other publications.



**Clio Chang** (page 40) is a writer based in New York covering politics, culture, and media. Her work can be found in The New Republic, The California Sunday Magazine, Jezebel, and more. Her biggest accomplishment to date is a profile of a dog.



**COVER: Following the police killing of George Floyd, a demonstrator raises her hands in front of a police line near the White House on May 31, 2020** ABOVE: Police hold a perimeter near the White House during the same protest

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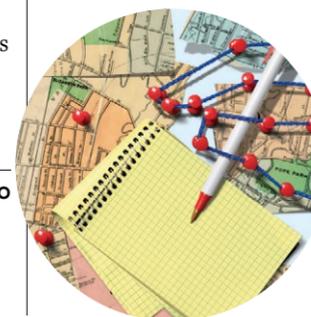
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## “You Can’t Fact-Check a Culture War”

The “Our Body Politic” host on culture war communication, what male white editors ignored in 2016, and more

**F**arai Chideya is a journalist whose career has encompassed academia as well as broadcast and print journalism. She has worked at news organizations including NPR, CNN, ABC News, FiveThirtyEight, and The Intercept.

Chideya has reported from 49 states and has covered every presidential election since 1996. As a fellow at Harvard’s Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy, she studied the lack of diversity in American newsrooms. Her books include “Don’t Believe the Hype: Fighting Cultural Misinformation About African Americans” and “The Episodic Career.”

Currently, Chideya is the program officer for journalism at the Ford Foundation, and she is the creator and host of “Our Body Politic,” a podcast by, about, and for Black women and women of color.

She spoke with Nieman Fellows in November. Edited excerpts:

### On understanding culture war communication

**Farai Chideya:** You have to understand the dynamics of culture war communication. I feel the political press and all press lost touch with the idea that you can’t fact-check a culture war. That’s just not how it works. You have to have the cultural competency to understand how you got into this culture war, who’s perpetrating it, who are the so-called bystanders.

The reality is no one’s a bystander in a culture war. You’re usually either a perpetrator, a resistance fighter, or a victim. I feel there is a fundamental misunderstanding of how the act of telling the truth through journalism is simply not enough without understanding why disinformation and lies work. They’re very appealing, and they go viral much faster

than the truth. Journalists have been slow on the uptake about that.

### On mocking

One of the things we talked about a lot this election cycle is the constant mocking of working income whites by the American press. In some ways, it’s more acceptable now to be mocking and scornful of working-class whites than it is to be so openly [mocking] of people of color. It’s completely unhelpful to mock working-class white Trump voters. It is helpful to go and talk to them and understand both the realities that they face and the manipulative messaging going on.

### On potentially fatal beliefs

The thing is it’s not disparaging of working-class white Americans to point out where some of them have bought into a culture war that also kills them. It’s doing good reporting, which is very different from mocking. In Jonathan Metzl’s “Dying of Whiteness,” which I highly recommend, he talks about different policies including white Americans who are poor who have been against Medicaid expansion through the Affordable Care Act, gun laws that empirically allow more white people to kill and be killed, etc. It’s an embrace of cultural nationalism, which is also tied to white nationalism through public policy.

There was a white nationalist, who I DMed with on Twitter for over a year. Someone was like, “Why would you want to talk to a white nationalist?” I said, “To understand why so many people are attracted to an ideology that then can be weaponized to gain political power like now.” They were like, “Well, I don’t think there’s that much you can learn from them,” and I was like, “Au contraire. If you understand

why people choose white nationalism over money and health and survival, you have unlocked a whole Candy Crush bonus.”

The reality is that a sense of belonging, a spiritual-cultural sense of belonging, is something that people will die for, for many different reasons, good and bad. People who died during the civil rights era died to make the world better for people of color and everyone.

People who are dying for whiteness also believe that they are making the world better. You can discuss that without endorsing their point of view, but to not understand it is part of the reason that we are where we are, because we just pretended it wasn’t happening.

There are a lot of people who are willing to die for a supremacist or nationalist view of whiteness. Rather than saying, “All these Trump voters are stupid because they won’t wear masks.” For the ones who don’t, start asking what is more important than life itself? Why are you following a political ideology that is leading you to die? Which is what’s happening, measurably. That’s an interesting question, and it produces interesting answers, which is a lot better than just being snarky.

When I’ve interviewed white supremacists and nationalists, they talk about coming home to family when they join active white supremacist movements. It reminds me very much of what people have said about joining gangs.

You could have a guy who is black or Latino who joined a gang in L.A. They may have the same motivation for joining a gang that a white nationalist has for joining a white supremacist movement. It is that sense of belonging that transcends your day-to-day life.

It doesn’t mean that having a sense of belonging is wrong. The people who have done the most good to this world have a passionate sense of belonging that drives their actions. What I’m saying is that the sense of belonging itself is neither inherently right nor wrong.

You can have a sense of belonging to any number of movements or affiliations that do harm or good in the world, and so to figure out why people feel that they have a sense of belonging rooted in racial resentment and terrorism is important.

### On asking the right questions

When journalists cover science, we can be culturally competent about the reasons why people deny science. For example, one study found that half of Black people in



Journalist Farai Chideya has covered every presidential election since 1996

America don’t intend to take the vaccine because of fear of the scientific institution’s racism, which is well documented.

Instead of saying, “Half of Black people are crazy and don’t want to live,” you could say, “Because of the long history of medical malpractice and deliberate use of Black people as test subjects, we find now that 50% of African Americans don’t want to take the vaccine. What would it take to prove to Black people that this is safe?”

One thing that was interesting is in Mississippi at first Black people were the most likely to die of Covid. Now it’s white people because Black Americans are wearing masks more than white Americans. I think Black Americans know that we’re dying disproportionately.

Also, in that question, it’s not, why are white people in Mississippi so stupid? The question is “What political and cultural factors make white Americans not want to wear masks in Mississippi?” It’s about finding the right question.

A lot of times, we’re just not asking the right question, or we’re just saying, ‘people are stupid.’ I think so much of dealing with information in a culture war era where there’s racial tensions is not going for the easy mocking answer.

### On what white male editors ignored

When I talked about the role of racial

resentment in affinity for Trump [in 2016], I was shut down by a lot of my editors who were all white men. I have had one of my former editors apologize to me for basically not paying attention to what I said. The reality is that I wasn’t just saying this; I think there was an assumption that I was saying this because I was Black. No, I’m a Black woman who’s been a reporter for three decades, and who’s been out in the field, and who is out in the field now.

My lived experience plus my reporting experience actually means I know things, but in newsrooms, the truth that makes the printed page, or the digital page, or makes air, is often shaped by what editors think is true.

If you come in with a totally true story that’s a man bites dog story, to them, they may genuinely think, “Oh, that’s a man bites dog story, and it’s just not true. It’s got to have been made up.”

If you’re someone like me who’s a Black American who’s taken rental cars through 49 of the 50 U.S. states in America and talked to white nationalists, and talked to people working on labor rights, and immigration rights, and shutting down evictions, and real estate speculators who are buying buildings, and all these different types of people, I haven’t seen a man bite a dog, but I’ve seen a lot.

There is a question in newsrooms of

how people who hold the top editorial power perceive the work of the people in their own newsrooms, let alone outside of them. It’s a huge problem.

If the news media had listened to Black and other non-white reporters more in 2016, I don’t think there would have been this breathless clutching of pearls like, “Oh, my God. This isn’t the America I know.” That’s because you don’t leave the house.

Honestly, the reality is that people who get to decide the news also have to decide what uncomfortable truths we tell about our nation. No group of people, Black, white, or purple, is perfect, but there was a conscious stifling of narratives around white racial resentment out of the misguided idea that somehow that made the news more fair. It does not.

What makes the news fair is listening to people who use racial resentment as one of the indicators for who they should vote for, and finding out why. Not to suppress that they believe that but say, “Well, what makes you think that?” and get into the circumstances of their lives.

Even when I interview a white supremacist, I don’t view them as people without merit. I don’t view them as inhuman. I view them as human beings, making a set of choices about their life, choices that I may not agree with, but that I choose to understand rather than to suppress the knowledge of.

In many cases, media organizations basically said, “I can’t cover this, because it’s too hot. I can’t talk about this.”

### On knowing when to leave

If the place you’re working has no willingness to change, stop trying to change it. Get out. I am here to tell you that it is better to break for the fences if there is no willingness to change than to keep beating your head against a cinderblock wall. That doesn’t mean to abandon newsrooms, or to give up too easily. It’s to ask yourself, is your job to try to use a toothpick to break through a cinderblock wall, or to figure out where the door is and get out?

It may not even mean getting out of a company. It may mean getting out of the mindset and saying, “All of us are overworked. Half of our team is parenting from home. When can we reasonably expect to have this discussion at a time where we can be more focused about it?” ■

## Making Meaning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

With her documentary “Out of the Picture,” Mary Louise Schumacher, NF ’17, examines the future of the American art critic



Mary Louise Schumacher (center) with Mark Escribano and Cindy Eggert Johnson on a shoot for a documentary about art critics at the Marlborough Gallery in New York

When I first set out to make “Out of the Picture,” a documentary film about art critics, my motivation was personal. I wanted to understand a profession that seemed to be collapsing as I was coming into it.

I wondered what would happen to other art critics, consequential voices I cared about, at a time when newsroom downsizings and critic departures were routine. I wanted to grapple with what was happening to art and media, and what this period of change might mean for all of us.

Back then, about a decade ago, I was a Milwaukee Journal Sentinel art critic. What I was attempting would be hard, I knew. Art critics do not live inherently cinematic lives, after all. We look at things and quietly contend with our experiences at keyboards. We fall into our beds at night with laptops, exhibition catalogues, and swirling brains. It makes for a riveting internal life, but action adventure it is not.

Still, my journalistic gut had kicked in. I took a leap of faith, put together a team,

and began capturing the lives, work, and thinking of a select group of critics. We followed Jen Graves through Seattle’s underground art scene and Carolina Miranda to a mountain-top “dashboard Jesus” outside of Tijuana. We witnessed Jeneé Osterheldt experience artful acts of memory at the site of George Floyd’s murder, and we were there when Hrag Vartanian invented the term “blogazine” for his then fledgling website, Hyperallergic.

Near the end of my Nieman year, I also went deeper into this research and conducted a survey of more than 300 visual arts journalists, which revealed a lot about the power structures of the field. The findings, which were published in Nieman Reports, informed the narrative we were shaping. We began to ask more questions about who is and is not equipped to engage the work of today’s most relevant artists — formally, culturally, and politically.

Ironically, the film got more of my

focused attention after my own job was eliminated in a systemwide downsizing by Gannett in 2019, which, yes, we did film. Since then, I’ve been working with our editor to cut scenes and an assembly, essentially a rough draft of the final film.

As I write this, I am preparing for a cross-country journey to complete principal photography for the film. Over the next few months I’ll work with local teams, using Covid protocols, to shoot several of our subjects for the last time.

As our cameras have rolled over the years, some of the critics we’ve followed have risen to become essential voices of a generation, and we witnessed a turning point for both culture and media. We hope “Out of the Picture,” slated to be complete this summer, will prompt a national conversation not only about an ostensibly esoteric subject — the American art critic today — but also the nature of art and how meaning gets made in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. ■

## Open Canada Covers Foreign Affairs with a Human Touch

Editor Michael Petrou, NF ’18, invites people whose voices aren’t usually heard in foreign policy publications to tell their stories

Canadians haven’t had to worry too much about the rest of the world for the past 75 years. We’re surrounded by two wide oceans, one frozen one, and a powerful neighbor whose close friendship has given us

added international heft.

Canadians recoil at being labeled provincial or isolationist, and it’s true that many of us travel, study, and work abroad. But trying to get Canadians to care about what happens elsewhere is a challenge.

Political candidates can ignore foreign policy and still get elected. International news stories don’t draw many eyeballs.

So why am I, as editor-in-chief, leading the relaunch of Open Canada, a digital magazine about Canada’s place in the world? In part, it’s because I never stopped caring about the rest of the world. In part, it’s because I think Canadians should care more.

I’m trying to attract readers the same way any good editor does: by respecting them and engaging them

## Local News Doesn’t Mean Parochial News

With URL Media, S. Mitra Kalita, NF ’21, seeks to elevate Black and brown media organizations

The June primary to represent my district in the state legislature in Albany was a crowded one. One night, I received a text message from a neighbor to tune into a debate on Facebook hosted by TBN24, a television news channel for Bangladeshis living around the globe.

It was like no local debate I have ever seen before, and subsequently forced me to reimagine the media’s role in elections. TBN24’s interest in the Assembly race might have been initially stoked by the fact that a Bangladeshi taxi driver and labor organizer, Joy Chowdhury, was a candidate. But moderators asked questions from the perspective of Uber drivers, small businesses, Covid victims. The discussion was relatable, and they forced candidates and their policy platforms to get personal and precise.

Over the last few weeks, people have asked me for the origin story of URL Media, the network of community media outlets I launched in January with my co-founder Sara Lomax-Reese. I think TBN24’s debate is among those ‘aha’ moments where I realized the journalism we’ve always done deserves to be upended.

After that bottom-up debate, I tracked down TBN24’s co-founder, Habib Rahman, and have not left him alone since. I find myself gut-checking with him on so many matters from, say, the stimulus bill to a candidate’s real chances of winning to how the vaccine rollout is going. What I appreciate about our conversations is that I never know if he will be relaying news from the few blocks between his house and

mine (we live in bordering neighborhoods of Queens) or the growing Bangladeshi communities in Michigan and Pennsylvania, or a perspective from back home (my parents are from Assam, right next to Bangladesh).

TBN24 boasts 2.2 million fans on Facebook. On the same platform, that’s more than Newsweek and the Chicago Tribune combined. My guess is most journalists have never heard of it. URL Media is seeking to change that.

On the heels of our January soft launch, Rahman was on WNYC’s “The Brian Lehrer Show” talking about another political race, a special election in Queens where four Bangladeshis were running. TBN24’s formula is familiar across our partner organizations: we produce content in service of our communities. And that makes us more valuable to each other. When Epicenter, my newsletter to help New Yorkers get through the pandemic, decides we need to do something on the Census, we lean into being of service to our readers, sharing how to fill out forms and why it matters. That approach proves to be equally useful for the Haitian Times, even though our Q&A was rooted in a different immigrant community. It republished our story. Our content is focused, but it is hardly narrow.

By creating URL Media, we believe that, by working together, we can break through and achieve scale without sacrificing our authenticity and relevance to our core audiences. Our other hope is that you will hear about certain story lines sooner, from the perspective of those most affected, rooted in a sense of place, people, and

purpose. Already, we have evidence of being early on stories around food insecurity, evictions, and small business closures and adaptations.

Of late, there’s been a lot of talk of “saving” local news. We tend to define what we mean by geography. The reason I prefer the term “community news” is because it’s more expansive and defined by seeking connectivity among each other, versus stopping at a border, a zip code, an imaginary line. To serve “local” is to accept limitation. None of us works for an internet that accepts the limits of scale. Thus, serving a community feels like better business and journalistic practice.

Habib and I have a lot in common, as fellow South Asians. But his viewers and WURD’s listeners do, too, as the radio station has a big Muslim listenership. His audiences care about immigration policy and the fate of DACA under President Biden, as does another network partner, Documented NY. I believe within these overlaps lie great stories and opportunity.

In January, I started my visiting Nieman fellowship. I am trying to experiment with coverage of New York City elections — our primary is in June — in precisely the manner TBN24 did for the Assembly race. These overlaps in our current class are where I am finding the most value. My colleague Kyle Edwards of Native News Online, in our introductory session, detailed a project on what Native communities are losing because of Covid. I seized on his language of how to cover that which has been lost. His outlet recently published a piece with the headline: “Elders are our memory banks. Taking the Covid vaccine can save them.” As we near the one-year anniversary of the lockdown, I draw on lessons from entrenched communities like his, across time and generations, to foreshadow what awaits us relative newcomers. ■

DARREN CALABRESE/THE CANADIAN PRESS VIA THE ASSOCIATED PRESS  
OPPOSITE: DEAN JOHNSON

with writing that’s pleasurable to read, with commentary and analysis that’s provocative and stimulating. I’m also trying to broaden the conversation to include people whose voices we don’t typically hear in academic foreign policy conferences, or in the journal articles and papers that come out of them.

I’ve published a package about the 25,000 Syrian refugees who arrived in Canada five years ago, written by one of them. I’ve started a feature called “Leaving and Finding Home,” a collection of

personal essays about people coming to Canada for the first time, and about leaving it. The first is by Zahra Nader, an Afghan woman who quit her job with The New York Times in Kabul so that her son could have a better childhood in Canada than she did as a refugee in Iran.

These stories reflect my belief that foreign affairs isn’t just about government policy. It’s also about how all of us move through the world and interact with those who live in it. I hope it makes for rich and enjoyable journalism, too. ■



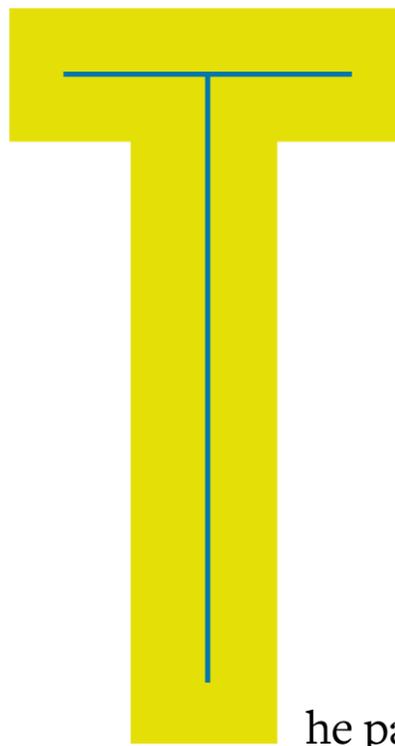
A gathering is held to welcome a Syrian refugee family to Nova Scotia, Canada

# “A CLIMATE OF FEAR”

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is cracking down on the free press — and the free press is pushing back

BY MADELEINE SCHWARTZ





he past few weeks  
have been challenging for independent media in India.

At least nine Indian journalists found themselves facing criminal charges for reporting that police allegedly shot a farmer during protests in Delhi at the end of January. The journalists reporting on the case were charged with sedition, even though the reporting was later found to be accurate. The police claimed that the man had died from an overturned tractor. Footage and an autopsy report showed he had gunshot wounds.

Twitter temporarily blocked the accounts of some 100 activists, journalists, and publications that have been critical of the government, including that of independent magazine *The Caravan*, which specializes in long-form investigative journalism. Twitter blocked the accounts at the request of the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, according to Indian media sources. The accounts were later restored.

One *Caravan* freelance journalist, Mandeep Punia — who was arrested and jailed for more than two days after posting a video of the farmers’ protests — interviewed farmers who had been jailed with him and, in the absence of a notebook, took notes on his legs so he could file a story after his release on bail.

These attacks on the free press come after years of growing repression from Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s government. “The Modi government has created a climate of fear,” says Aliya Iftikhar, who researches Indian freedom-of-the-press issues for the Committee to Protect Journalists. For both Indian outlets and non-Indian outlets, the situation has become more dangerous, while new legislation makes it more difficult for remain-

ing independent outlets to continue doing their work.

Modi’s government has intensively sued journalists on charges of sedition and treason. Even when prosecutors are unlikely to win cases, journalists accused of sedition or fighting an accusation under a terrorism law must spend time and money rebutting allegations. “The judicial process is very, very slow,” says Iftikhar — and expensive, a significant drain on independent outlets’ already tenuous finances.

Recent years have seen “criminal cases lodged against journalists in India for their work, with a majority of cases in BJP [Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party]-ruled states,” according to a report by the Free Speech Collective, an Indian freedom-of-the-press organization. “They are going profession after profession,” says investigative journalist and *Caravan* contributor Vidya Krishnan of the legal onslaught. “It’s not just journalists [but] poets and intellectuals and comedians.”

Violence against journalists has also grown. The Free Speech Collective calculates that, in the last decade, “154 journalists in India were arrested, detained, interrogated, or served ‘show cause notices’ [which indicate that a party must appear before court] for their professional work.” More than 40% of those cases took place in 2020.

The situation is especially dire for journalists in rural areas, who lack the visibility and following of those based in large cities. Rural journalists “are not necessarily writing against Modi or the government or these laws or on farmer protests,” says one journalist working in India, who for safety reasons asked not to be identi-



fied. “They might write on corruption in a small town. They might write on sand smuggling [sand, used in construction, is an increasingly expensive resource in India] somewhere or coal smuggling or the coal mafia. [But because] all those things are being also controlled somehow by the government, the next day you will find somebody is being run over by a truck, somebody has been shot. And those stories really don’t come out.”

One example is Siddique Kappan, a journalist based in Kerala who was arrested in October when reporting on a rape. He is still in jail, though in mid-February was granted five days’ bail to visit his ailing mother.

Trolling from individuals and bots associated with Hindu nationalists has also become more common. Hindu Nationalism has grown under Modi, bringing with it more abuse and violence against minorities and journalists from trolls and followers inflamed by the BJP’s rhetoric. “Most of times they find your number, they start getting into your WhatsApp inbox, your Instagram, Facebook, Twitter; you get hate mail in huge numbers. And then there’s always this thing in your mind, what if they find my address, and they just come here and start doing whatever they like to do?” the journalist who asked not to be identified explains. Trolls “have this impunity, where they can just do anything and then get away with it.”

Most investigative and critical reporting in India is done by independent outlets, many of which are online only. A recent ministerial order is having further consequences for the country’s journalists, even as the



**ABOVE:** Journalist Siddique Kappan (in gray cap) and three others are escorted by police to a court in Mathura, Uttar Pradesh, in October 2020  
**LEFT:** Journalist Mandeep Punia after being granted bail in Delhi

scope of the new law’s long-term consequences remain unclear.

The ministerial order, which goes into effect in November 2021, clarified that digital information platforms cannot receive more than 26% of their funding from sources outside India. Similar regulation already exists to regulate television and print media companies. This limits how much digital media can fundraise, restricting the size and scope of newsrooms. Legacy media in India are funded by government advertising contracts, so reporters often find themselves trying to investigate officials who are indirectly funding their stories. Outside funding from investors gave digital media a sense of independence and protection from politics.

In October, the Indian government sent an email to a number of online outlets informing them of the new policy. Many of the sites that received the email,

**PREVIOUS SPREAD:** Widows and other relatives of farmers suspected of killing themselves over debt attend a protest against farm bills near Delhi, India, in December 2020

PREVIOUS SPREAD: ANUSHREE FADNAVIS/REUTERS  
OPPOSITE TOP: PRESS TRUST OF INDIA INSET: LIVELAW/TWITTER

which was seen by Nieman Reports, were known for their investigative reporting, such as The Wire as well as Kashmir Reader, a site based in that contested region. The email itself only referred to the revised legislation. Still, “it’s pretty clear from the [revised policy] that it is meant to control digital media,” says Manisha Pande, executive editor of NewsLaundry, which publishes investigative and daily reporting on Indian politics. “For us to remain independent under these new rules ... in my mind it will make it tougher.”

Founded in 2012, NewsLaundry has reported deeply on the Delhi riots last year, in which Hindu mobs attacked and killed Muslim residents, and published award-winning investigations into the lack of safety gear for health workers during the coronavirus pandemic. As the government attacks journalists for reporting on the farmers’ protesters, NewsLaundry has continued to interview farmers protesting against the agrarian laws. In a story published in early February, protesters describe how they look forward to voting out the BJP.

“Like many legislations in the last few years, there have been clarifications and clarifications,” says Abhinandan Sekhri, NewsLaundry co-founder and CEO. “At the face of it, it impacts anyone who has taken investments and runs a digital information platform.” He notes that even funds within India but have outside investments may qualify as “foreign” sources of capital.

“We often crowdfund our reporting, and we can do that because we’re small,” says Pande. “And because we’re small, we can take on the big guys.” But a cap on outside capital limits the eventual growth of the site. NewsLaundry receives much of its revenue

## “ F SUDDENLY YOU FIND INDEPENDENT PUBLICATIONS IN INDIA DISAPPEARING ONE BY ONE, I’M NOT SURE WHAT JOURNALISTS IN KASHMIR WOULD DO”

from subscriptions but has also raised money from the Omidyar Network, an international philanthropic network. “Individual organizations will now have to look at their future growth plans,” Sekhri adds.

The accusation of “foreign meddling” echoes that used by another authoritarian ruler, President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines, who has attacked media critical of his murderous war on drugs and other assaults on individual lives and liberties. Duterte has gone after Rappler, an independent news site in the Philippines that has been funded by outside networks like Omidyar. The site’s co-founder and CEO, Maria Ressa, has faced 10 criminal charges in the past two years. In June of last year, she was found guilty of “cyberlibel” for Rappler’s reporting about the links between a businessman and

a now-deceased judge. The case has an uncertain legal basis; Rappler has stated that the charge of “cyberlibel” did not exist at the time of the article’s publication. In January, Ressa faced a new cyberlibel charge concerning a story about students allegedly paying a professor.

Digital media platforms have anticipated this legislation for several years. Last year, a group of digital news outlets, including NewsLaundry, set up the DIGIPUB News India Foundation, a consortium that represents digital news media organizations and advocates on their behalf. The organization works for the independence of digital news media by encouraging different outlets to share resources. In the past few weeks, it has also been tracking the arrests of journalists and raids against newsrooms.

Details on how widely the legislation will apply are still unclear, but its effects are expected to be far-reaching, and some can already be seen. The legislation may be used in the future to curb the expansion of European and American media in India or may affect tech companies that display journalistic content, like Facebook.

HuffPost India has already closed. Indrani Basu, who worked as news and politics editor of HuffPost India from its launch in 2014 to 2018, was initially excited by the independence of digital media. “You couldn’t take away our advertisement or funding,” she says. Over the last six years, the site gained a strong reputation for accountability journalism covering the Delhi riots in February 2020, government corruption in the sand-mining business, and how the Indian government faked data to boost the idea of “Digital India,” a government campaign aimed at strengthening India’s digital economy through components such as connecting rural areas with high-speed internet networks.

The future of this kind of investigative work is now in question, as is reporting done about the crisis in Kashmir, much of which was also published by HuffPost. This work, done by local correspondents who “were living that experience in Kashmir” and whose voices are rarely heard in legacy media, may now be harder to access, says Basu.

“In Kashmir, we were already witnessing intensified state intervention,” says Aakash Hassan, a journalist based in Kashmir who has written about how the Kashmiri “cyber police” torture social media users. A few months ago, one of his colleagues working on a similar story was called to a police station and beaten there. “They are trying to criminalize journalism. ... It’s becoming extremely, extremely difficult to operate and work as a journalist. It’s nearly impossible.”

Meanwhile, the government has gone after other independent media — like The Caravan, known for its aggressive reporting — in new ways. In 2018 The Caravan published numerous articles critical of the BJP, such as an article about the BJP’s national president’s finances as well as investigations into the mysterious death of a judge who had been presiding over a murder trial involving a close friend of Modi’s. The Caravan “has become an orphanage for journalists who were edged out of legacy newsrooms like myself,” says contributor Krishnan.



In a conversation that took place at the end of December, before the farmers’ protests and most recent government crackdown, Caravan editor Vinod Jose said that four journalists from his newsroom had been attacked in the previous three months while reporting in a Delhi neighborhood where Muslims were killed in riots. “It’s a small newsroom but they are closely being watched by the intelligence agencies and the mobs,” Jose said of his colleagues.

“We saw the change in the media landscape probably a year before [Modi] came to power” in 2014, Jose said. “We could see a number of editors changing, the coverage changing.” When Modi took power, “You could see a direct proactive involvement” from the government in newsrooms. Around that time, The Caravan started receiving stories from independent journalists that other publications no longer wanted to publish.

Since the farmers’ protests, Jose says, the magazine

has faced a legislative onslaught: ten sedition cases against him personally in five states, as well as against the publishers of the magazine for coverage of the protests.

There has been “no resistance from publishers whatsoever,” Jose said of mainstream media in the country. If anything, he suggested, owners of legacy media companies, many of whom have remained close to Modi, may stand to gain by a decline in digital media. Last August, the editorial page of The Hindustan Times called the legislation limiting foreign funding a “welcome move,” and argued that the “government should also expand the definition of digital media” to include more outlets.

Meanwhile, journalists in India continue to report, despite the obstacles. Says Krishnan, the investigative journalist, “We are fighting for whether truth is meaningful or not.” ■

**A paramilitary policeman swings his baton at an elderly Sikh man at the Singhu border in northwest Delhi. The photo went viral on social media and became a defining image of the ongoing farmers’ protests**

# “WE LIVE IN AN AGE OF MINI-MASSACRES”



## Man Booker Prize-winning author Arundhati Roy on the state of India’s democracy, the role of the media, and more

**A**rundhati Roy’s first novel, “The God of Small Things,” won the Man Booker Prize in 1997. Her second, “The Ministry of Utmost Happiness,” was shortlisted for it. These books, written two decades apart, capture how India has changed. In addition to her fiction, Roy’s political essays taught a generation of young Indian writers to think incendiary thoughts.

At a time when democratic values are under siege in India, as they are elsewhere around the world, Roy’s analysis of issues like nuclear weapons, industrialization, nationalism, and more is essential to this moment. Roy spoke with the Nieman Foundation in February. Edited excerpts:

### On whether India is still a democracy

Of course not. Apart from the laws that exist, like the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act [1967 anti-terrorism legislation to prevent unlawful associations and “maintain the sovereignty and integrity of India”], under which you have hundreds of people now just being picked up and put into jail every day, every institution that is meant to work as a check against unaccountable power is seriously compromised.

Also, the elections are compromised. I don’t think we have free and fair elections because you have a system now of secret electoral bonds, which allows business corporations to secretly fund political parties. We have today a party that is the richest political party in the world, the BJP. Elections in India have become a spectator sport — it’s like watching a Ferrari racing a few old bicycles.

In any case, a democracy doesn’t mean just elections. First of all, India hasn’t been a democracy in Kashmir or in Bastar [a district in the state of Chhattisgarh], or for the poorest of the poor who have no access to institutions of justice, who live completely under the boot of police and the justice system that crushes them with violence and indifference.

SUKI DHANDA

Now the oxygen is being taken away, sucked out of the lungs of even the middle class and even the big farmers, the agricultural elite.

### On the role the media has played in the decline of India’s democracy

None of this could have happened if it wasn’t the media. Here you see the confluence of corporate money, corporate advertisement, and this vicious nationalism. You can’t even call them media or journalists anymore. It would be wrong.

The only [legitimate] media that there is now is a few people who are online who are managing very bravely to carry on and a few magazines like Caravan. I was recently listening to a very moving talk by this young journalist called Mandeep Punia who had just been arrested and beaten up. He was talking about how so many of his fellow journalists cannot be called journalists anymore.

They’re just people who act out a script every day. If you look at the media, the police — I’m sorry to say this, but it’s almost diseased. [Politicians such as] Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Minister of Home Affairs Amit Shah, none of them would be anything but just some small-time hoods on the street if it wasn’t for the media, I’d say. They have been built up and amplified by this unbelievably invasive, relentless propaganda machine.

### On the role of the writer or the artist in democracies in crisis

It’s been a question that’s very interesting to me for as long as I’ve ever been a writer. To me, it’s always been the case that I feel like you need to have eyes around your head. For example, if you look at what’s happening with the farm protests now, how do you understand it, as a writer or as a human being?

The agriculture crisis is a real crisis. It wasn’t created by Hindu fundamentalism. It was created by the Green Revolution when capital-intensive farming was introduced, and by the overmining of water, by the overuse of pesticides, by hybrid seeds, by putting in massive irrigation projects and not thinking about how to drain the water. So how do I make literature out of irrigation problems, or drainage, or electricity?

It’s been something that I’ve been pretty obsessed with, understanding things which are not normally considered a fiction writer’s business. To me, I can’t write fiction unless I make it my business. You have to know how all these things intersect with each other. How does caste, or race, or class, or irrigation, or borewells affect what might seem like a clash between two communities?

### On the writing process

I am a structure nerd. A lot of it has to do with the fact that I studied architecture, and that I always have been interested in cities, how they are structured and how they work, and how institutions in the city are built for citizens, and the noncitizens live in the cracks.

To me, if you look at my fiction or the nonfiction,

even almost every nonfiction essay, it is a story. It seems to be the only way I can explain things to myself. There is a mathematics to the way the structure works. To me, the structure and the language is as important as the story or the characters.

I don’t think I’m capable of writing something from A to B. It has to take a walk around the park, and then come back to certain places, and then have these reference points. Structure’s everything.

### On the dangers to journalists, intellectuals, and activists in India

The thing is, what we first have to understand is how ordinary people — ordinary villagers, Indigenous people, women guerillas who’ve been fighting mining corporations, people whose names we don’t know — have been dragged into prison, have been humiliated, even sexually humiliated. Those who have humiliated them have been given bravery awards. Look at the number who have been imprisoned, executed, buried in mass graves in Kashmir. All that violence that many Indians have accepted quite comfortably, even approved of, has now arrived at their doorsteps.

When you’re a journalist, a writer, anybody whose head is above the water, you’re already privileged in terms of someone’s looking out for you. You have a lawyer. Meanwhile, we have thousands of people who are in prison who don’t have any access to legal help, nothing.

Then you have a situation where, I’d say, the best of the best — I mean journalists, trade unionists, lawyers who defend them — are in jail. We know a lot of them are in jail for entirely made-up reasons. There are students in jail. The latest police trick is to make a charge-sheet that is 17,000 pages, 30,000 pages. You’d need a whole bloody library shelf in your prison cell to accommodate your own charge-sheet. A lawyer or a judge can’t even read it, let alone adjudicate upon it, for years maybe. They are continuously arresting people, or threatening people with arrest. The harassment, even if you are not actually in prison, is unbelievable. Your life comes to a standstill.

### On what gives hope

I have days of utter desolation and hopelessness, like millions of others here. But the fact is that when we develop a way of thinking and seeing, many of us end up being people who know that we’ve got to do what we have to do. Whether we win or lose, we’re going to do it because we’re never going over to the other side.

You’ve got to keep holding on to that, because that is what puts the oxygen in our lungs, that way of thinking, that way of not aggrandizing yourself to an extent where you think you can solve all the world’s problems. You can’t, but you can do something, so you just keep doing that something.

There isn’t ever going to be an end to the chaos. But we have to be able to accommodate that chaos in our minds and be part of it, swim with it, absorb it, influence it, turn it to our purpose. The wind will change direction at some point, won’t it? ■

“THE BEST OF THE BEST — JOURNALISTS, TRADE UNIONISTS, LAWYERS WHO DEFEND THEM — ARE IN JAIL”



# RAGE AGAINST THE MEDIA

**Trump's stoking of hostility  
— rhetorical and physical —  
toward reporters is outlasting  
his presidency**

**BY CELESTE KATZ MARSTON**

# M

**OST DAYS, PAUL GILLESPIE KEEPS HIMSELF TO PHOTOGRAPHING** the news, not commenting on it. January 6, 2021, wasn't one of those days.

As violent pro-Donald Trump rioters laid siege to the U.S. Capitol, disrupting congressional certification of the 2020 election results, an image circulated of a grim message scrawled on a door to the hallowed building: "Murder the Media." Gillespie, a survivor of the 2018 disgruntled-reader rampage in Annapolis, Maryland, that left five Capital Gazette newsroom colleagues dead, had to respond — and began tweeting out his portraits of the fallen and their survivors.

"That might just be words [to] whoever wrote that, or they might think it's funny, or they might really mean it — but it happened to me. ... Five of my Capital Gazette family members were murdered all around me. My head was almost taken off my body," he says. "[I] had to let it be known: [We're] not make-believe. We are real people who live in your communities, and we go to the job every day just trying to do the best job we can."

As Gillespie notes, the motive for the notorious Annapolis shooting, unlike the January 6 rampage, did not center on President Trump, who systematically stoked suspicion and hatred of the press even before his 2016 election. Even now that President Biden is in office, Gillespie and others in the field remain concerned about a political climate that has been fertile ground for attacks, rhetorical and physical, on the media Trump demonizes.

There's been a torrent of condemnations of the violence at the Capitol, where re-

porters and photographers tell of being threatened with shooting and working among demonstrators wearing T-shirts with slogans like "Hang the media." New York Times photographer Erin Schaff described being thrown to the ground by hostile men as the Capitol was overrun. Julio Cortez of The Associated Press shared video of his colleague, photographer John Minchillo, being bodily dragged into a crowd of Trump supporters. "This is a reminder of the dangers journalists both in the U.S. and around the world face every day while simply trying to do their jobs," says AP spokesman Patrick Maks.

More than 2,000 miles away, Salt Lake Tribune photojournalist Rick Egan was covering a pro-Trump demonstration at the Utah State Capitol on January 6 when a man rushed him and pepper-sprayed him in the face. A colleague flushed Egan's eyes with water after the assault, which the paper decried as an unacceptable attack on local journalism. Once his eyesight returned, Egan says, he made photos for another two hours.

Egan, a 36-year veteran of the Tribune, thinks Trump bears responsibility for stoking anti-media animus: "Making us 'the enemy of the people' has made it hard. ... [The Trump supporters] just come right at us, like, 'Who are you with?' and 'What do you think you're doing here?' Egan says. "[They] attack us, which is something totally new to me in my career."

While some people believed once Trump lost, "a lot of these people [would] peel off and think, 'Okay, he

really is a loser [and] half the stuff he says are lies,' [that] hasn't seemed to happen yet," Egan adds.

The rage Trump normalized in the past five years is in some ways elemental. Bernard Golden, a Chicago-based psychologist and author of "Overcoming Destructive Anger," says, "Anger is energizing; it's like a shot of caffeine in our body. We feel more alive with anger." While in decades past, people viewed an "angry" politician as flawed, he says, widespread "modeling of anger gives us permission to be angry" — whether it's from the very top of the government or a proliferation of TV news and talk shows that have found that conflict sells.

"Those people who marched into the Capitol, they felt empowered," Golden says. "Anger could become an identity, and it [has]."

Trump's messaging has clearly had its deleterious effect on public discourse — both by defining it and by derailing it. During recent Senate runoffs in Georgia, Golden says, candidates tried to debate concrete issues like the economic stimulus and health insurance, but "Trump and others like him have completely distracted them by the hatred, finding 'the other' to focus on, rather than [the] hard task of coming up with answers to the problems we have."

Diminishing the media is something Trump became incredibly good at — but it's obviously not a new tactic. "The statement that the media is 'the enemy of the people' is straight out of Stalin's playbook, but more re-

PREVIOUS SPREAD: MICHAEL NIGRO/SIPA USA VIA THE ASSOCIATED PRESS  
ERIC GAY/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS



**A man is restrained after shoving members of the media during a 2019 Trump rally in El Paso, Texas**

cently, [look] at what happened in the Balkans during the '90s, [and what's] happening in the Philippines. It is a global phenomenon," says Tanya Domi, an adjunct professor of international and public affairs at Columbia University and an expert on the Balkans and autocratic leaders in Eastern Europe.

The Fairness Doctrine, which required FCC-licensed TV and radio stations to give airtime to controversial public issues and allow opposing viewpoints on them, "needs to be re-instituted across all new contemporary platforms in which media is reported, [and] that has to become a priority," along with stronger education in areas like civics, says Domi. She also encourages congressional hearings, pushed by the heads of media organizations, on threats to a free press: "Journalists [are] harassed and have been threatened around the world and [they] live with it in a way that [is] really honorable, but after a while, that really diminishes your capacity to stay at it without backing of the editorial leadership. What you learn about autocrats is that they'll threaten and belittle and intimidate as long as they have the room to do it."

Thanks to the catastrophe in Washington, Trump's ability to suck up oxygen and directly mobilize his followers suffered a body blow: With days left in his presidency, and facing possible impeachment or invocation of the 25<sup>th</sup> Amendment, he saw major social media platforms kill his mic. Twitter, his prime megaphone, permanently suspended his account on January 8.

On the ground in D.C. and at statehouses across the country that had satellite pro-Trump rallies on January 6, coverage and safety choices had to be made by reporters in real time.

A video clip widely circulated during the Capitol rioting shows Andrew Wafford, a photojournalist for WJLA, a Washington, D.C. ABC affiliate, getting swarmed by Trump supporters shouting "Fake news" and "Get the f— out of here." Unlike Egan, who was ambushed in Utah, Wafford had the opportunity to extricate himself

from the situation — and calmly did.

"I'm not one to run or to scurry away from a situation, no matter how dangerous it is, [but] I walked away. I didn't think [it] would have been the wisest thing to say anything or just to confront them — as much as I wanted to," says Wafford, who's been with the station less than a year. He shared the video because "I want people to understand what [we] deal with."

Staying cool may not always be easy: Having "Murder the media" messages out there "made me even more grateful that [my] situation didn't turn bad," Wafford says in retrospect. "What if the person that was behind me was the one who wrote 'Murder the media'? ... I literally saw someone walk past me with a pitchfork. A pitchfork. [I] saw people with sticks and objects to hit people with and throw at people."

While Wafford walked away from the vitriol with his gear intact, others weren't as lucky.

D.C.-based Ford Fischer, whose activism footage is used by news outlets and documentarians via his company, News 2 Share, was at the Capitol when a mob overran a camera position, driving out the press on duty and destroying their equipment. He remembers a reporter's "real scream of fear." The marauders "picked things up and then smashed them back on the sidewalk, and they were chanting, 'Fake news! Fake news! We're the media now,' and that moment, for me, was horrifying," Fischer says.

While covering groups like the extremist Proud Boys, Fischer says he's seen that even in confrontational, anti-media situations, the hardcore right will "listen to leaders, [and to] hierarchical, top-down commands." That leads him to believe "the thing that would probably cause Trump's supporters to not have this level of animosity toward the media would be if they heard it out of President Trump's mouth."

The odds of that happening? "Extremely minuscule." ■

**PREVIOUS SPREAD:**  
Pro-Trump rioters attack the press pool and destroy TV production gear outside the Capitol on January 6



**HOW COVERAGE OF THE**

**POLICE IS CHANGING**

**SPURRED BY BLACK LIVES MATTER, NEWSROOMS ARE MOVING AWAY FROM PRIVILEGING POLICE ACCOUNTS OVER THOSE OF POLICE VIOLENCE VICTIMS**  
**BY ADESHINA EMMANUEL**



**LEFT:** Members of the D.C. National Guard stand on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial as demonstrators peacefully protest against police brutality and the death of George Floyd on June 2, 2020  
**ABOVE:** Captured in livestream footage, a police officer fist bumps with an insurrectionist inside the Capitol on January 6

## WHAT IF THE PEOPLE STORMING THE CAPITOL ON JANUARY 6 HAD BEEN BLACK?

**PREVIOUS SPREAD:** A demonstrator faces a police line in front of the White House on May 31, 2020, while protesting the death of George Floyd at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer

**Newsrooms around the U.S. posed that question as largely white pro-Trump rioters and white supremacists, incited by the president himself, stormed the Capitol, waving Confederate flags and Trump 2020 banners, vandalizing the building, and threatening lawmakers. The mob quickly overwhelmed police, some of whom posed for selfies or gave fist bumps to the insurrectionists. Five people died in the melee, including one Capitol Police officer.**

Compare the police response on January 6 with the overwhelming force federal law enforcement used against the diverse group of people who gathered outside the White House on June 1 to peacefully protest the police killing of George Floyd, and consider the acts of brutality committed by police at Black Lives Matter protests across the country this past summer.

Many journalists were quick to call out the double standard, a sign of growth in newsrooms. Last summer some news outlets wrongly cast BLM protesters in broad strokes as rioters and looters. But the killing of George Floyd by Minnesota police officers in May and the national uprising against police violence and anti-Blackness that followed has prompted a reckoning in newsrooms, many of which have audited their race coverage, launched initiatives to rethink how their past crime coverage impacted communities of color, and held themselves accountable for their failures. It's time to do that for coverage of police, too.

Journalism plays an influential role in uncovering and framing state violence and systemic oppression. But journalists also have a history of stoking the trauma and disrespect suffered by families when police kill their loved ones, and of privileging police accounts above those of police violence victims and their fam-

ilies and friends. It's a harmful pattern that, in the Black community, has increased distrust of both the media and the police. Newsrooms often fixate on the moment of death, leaning heavily on police narratives, and — as those narratives often do — assassinate the characters of police violence victims, such as when The New York Times reported, in the wake of police killing Michael Brown in 2015, that the teenager was “no angel.”

Coverage of police violence needs to change — and there are some signs that it is.

A new coverage dynamic is emerging. Outlets are crowdsourcing video investigations of police use of force, centering accounts from demonstrators and police violence victims rather than police accounts and concerns about property damage. Newsrooms are taking an interdisciplinary approach to reporting, scrutinizing, for example, the relationship between tech corporations and police monitoring activists' social media feeds. And reporters are telling more in-depth stories about victims of police violence, without fixating on the killing or digging into the victim's past to highlight criminality.

Context is key. Police violence doesn't just happen. We live in a society that creates the conditions for police violence, especially against Black people. Police are part of a system in which Black people live disproportionate-

ly in segregated, economically disinvested, over-policed communities ravaged by mass incarceration.

These problems are compounded by the fact that newsrooms are rarely as diverse as the Black and brown communities in which they work. Many journalists consider public service their mission, but large swathes of the public feel ignored by us. Journalism also perpetuates harm through stereotypical portrayals of marginalized groups, by mischaracterizing the nature of anti-racist efforts — or ignoring them altogether — and by reporting injustices without historical context or critical framing.

In too many cases, we have focused less on demonstrators' concerns or treatment by police and more on aspects of protests that might inconvenience or scare audiences, like blocking rush hour traffic, damaging property, or displaying other “violent” behavior. Journalists have also gotten it wrong in accounts of police violence. As noted by Media Matters, coverage of Breonna Taylor's killing “branded her a ‘suspect’ and sanitized police violence.” One of the most powerful things I've read about Taylor, or any police shooting victim, was when journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates decided to get out the way and let Taylor's mother speak her truth in a told-to piece published in Vanity Fair.

Black journalists are having this reckoning, too, as explored by KPCC and LAist data editor Dana Amihere in her first-person piece, “Conflicted: A Black Journalist's

PREVIOUS SPREAD: SAMUEL CORUM/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES  
 WIN MCNAMEE/GETTY IMAGES

TIM GONNET

Reckoning With Her Race, Family And Police Brutality,” which describes her growing consciousness around the connection between police brutality and other institutions. “If we scorched the earth, we’d have to burn a lot of things down — mass incarceration, the war on drugs, the inequities in health and education — they’re all part of the same problem and it comes back to institutional racism,” says Amihere, whose family includes members of law enforcement and who is married to a white man.

The BLM movement, and the change it is prompting in newsrooms, challenges journalists to write about police violence in ways that center the perspectives of the individuals and communities most impacted, look more holistically at public safety beyond cops, uphold the dignity of the person slain, whether they are accused of wrongdoing or not — and address the harm perpetuated by coverage that fails to do these things.

### AVOIDING EXTRACTIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Even before the Capitol invasion, BLM protests had put police tactics on display at levels previously unseen. On June 23, the Chicago Reader published “Cops appear to violate use-of-force rules dozens of times at protests” in collaboration with the Invisible Institute, a small nonprofit investigative newsroom based on the South Side of Chicago. “A lot of the initial reporting of what happened in those days of protest emphasized looting and emphasized injuries to officers. But the aspect of police violence didn’t get picked up or treated the same way,” says Andrew Fan, the Invisible Institute data reporter who led the project. “There was a feeling that we needed to find a way to put that part of the narrative in the conversation.”

Fan worked with colleague Dana Brozost-Kelleher to compile video from the protests, capturing more than 80 baton strikes on some 32 people that appear to violate Chicago Police Department policy. While baton strikes don’t always make headlines, the story notes they “are one of the most serious types of force available to officers.” The department considers strikes to the head and neck as deadly force, so the measure is only allowed to be used rarely under CPD policy, says Fan. The department unveiled a new baton policy in February of last year as part of the consent decree, the CPD’s reform process that is overseen by a court. The new rules “outlined limits on when officers could use batons and emphasized de-escalation and providing warning to civilians before resorting to baton strikes,” according to the story.

A video from May 31 in the affluent River North community shows cops advancing on an apparently peaceful protest, “possibly in response to insults from the crowd,” the piece notes. As one witness said, “They just lifted up their batons and started swinging.” “What was striking with so many of these videos was cops hitting people directly, repeatedly, in situations that did not in any way seem to warrant it, with their batons,” Fan says. After publication, the CPD emailed a statement to the Chicago Reader that read, in part: “Sanctity of life and de-escalation serve as the cornerstones of the Chicago Police Department’s (CPD) use of force policy. Any incidents

of excessive force from CPD members are not tolerated, and if any wrongdoing is discovered, officers will be held accountable.”

The Chicago Reader/Invisible Institute project would not have been possible without crowdsourcing and engaging with the community. In response to posts on Twitter and Instagram, the Invisible Institute received around 60 videos. When doing this kind of reporting, Fan says it’s important to avoid “extractive relationships” with police violence victims that mine their stories without being clear about how the reporting will provide value to their community and without reporting back to the community directly when the story is done to get feedback and respond to concerns or other information needs. Continuing a relationship with — and providing value to — sources and readers is central to Invisible Institute’s approach.

Part of this community exchange involves the Citizens Police Data Project, which the Invisible Institute manages and includes more than 230,000 pages of Chicago police complaint documents stretching back decades. Users can access the tools to look up any CPD officer’s record and past claims that they’ve used excessive force. Fan has seen organizers use the data to call out officers for their records, in some cases to their faces. “We’re doing this reporting where we’re asking people to share stories. We also have ways that we can help people, give people tools as they’re going to things like protests,” Fan says. “We want to emphasize that back and forth relationship.”

The Invisible Institute avoids reporting that only asks police violence victims about the impact violence has had on their lives but not about solutions to their case or broader systemic problems. Reporters also talked with organizers about the issues they were fighting for, raising questions about the viability of police reform in Chicago.

Fan acknowledges challenges to this approach. The Invisible Institute admits in the June story that “our review of video footage cannot conclusively assess the officers’ use of force,” but “in most cases we were able to assess the circumstances that preceded officers using force.” Going through so many videos of police violence is a slow, arduous, and emotionally triggering process, in which there are ethical challenges about whether to show people’s faces. Reporters had to ensure that protesters consented to be identified.

Black organizers and left-leaning activists have, in fact, long worried about becoming targets of state surveillance or other retribution, making some reluctant to be identified in pictures or named in stories. Social media has exacerbated such fears, which is why many organizers are wary of tweeting about their actions.

### SOCIAL MEDIA AND SURVEILLANCE

These concerns speak to a strong connection between police surveillance, social media companies, and firms like Dataminr, an artificial intelligence startup that provides its customers, including government agencies, with information about global crises and news events. The Brennan Center, a nonpartisan law and policy institute, notes



ERIK MCGREGOR/LIGHTROCKET VIA GETTY IMAGES

that social media surveillance “poses risks to privacy and free expression, increases disproportionate surveillance of communities of color, and can lead to arrests of people on the basis of misinterpreted posts and associations.”

The Intercept and other outlets have shed light on how police departments watch civilians online and how they target communities of color. Many of these stories have come from technology reporters, not journalists on the cops beat. As outsiders to the police beat, technology reporters bring an interdisciplinary and intersectional approach that provides a window into this underreported aspect of policing. In his July investigation for The Intercept, technology reporter Sam Biddle demonstrated how domestic surveillance amid uprisings shows collaboration between police and Dataminr at a time when BLM protesters, as Black liberation activists before them, fear being targeted.

The catalyst for the story was staff researcher W. Paul Smith, who requested and quickly received emails from the city of Minneapolis containing correspondence with police about the protests after George Floyd was killed. The emails included two 5,000-page PDFs full of notification emails from Dataminr. “It became pretty clear that they were systematically keeping tabs on what was happening in the protests and scraping up a lot of people who were engaged in completely legal, completely peaceful, completely First Amendment-protected activities, either participating in or documenting the protests,” Biddle says. “It just struck me as something that people should know.”

Both Dataminr and Twitter — an early investor in Dataminr, as was the CIA — denied reports back in 2016

that the social media platform was being used to enable domestic surveillance. Among other measures meant to respond to criticism, Twitter said Dataminr, one of its official partners, would “no longer support direct access by fusion centers” that share intelligence between local, state, and national law enforcement agencies. But as Biddle reported, “Dataminr continues to enable what is essentially surveillance by U.S. law enforcement entities.” The story alleges that Dataminr wired tweets and other social media content about protests directly to police across the country, which it wouldn’t have been able to do without privileged access to Twitter data. Both Dataminr and Twitter have denied that the protest monitoring described in Biddle’s reporting falls under the definition of surveillance, and Dataminr maintains that its work is not meant for surveillance but aims to produce news alerts for emergencies like fires, shootings, and natural disasters, according to The Intercept.

As the protests were happening and Biddle was reporting his story, “a big dump of police fusion center data got put online,” he says. The “BlueLeaks” documents and data were hacked from more than 250 police websites and made public by activists, representing what The Intercept calls “an unprecedented exposure of the internal operations of federal, state, and local law enforcement.”

The BlueLeaks documents allowed Biddle to corroborate some of his reporting. He compared public records requests with the leaked government records, showing how police benefited from the special relationship between Dataminr and Twitter by getting alerts from Dataminr. “People should know what the risks are,” Biddle says, especially given the supportive public stance

**Hundreds of New Yorkers participated in a Brooklyn march demanding justice for victims of police brutality on June 12, 2020**

**SOCIAL MEDIA  
MONITORING HAS  
BEEN MISUSED TO  
TARGET PEOPLE  
OF COLOR AS  
PART OF POLICE  
SURVEILLANCE**

Twitter has taken in the BLM movement. “They are vocally presenting and being supportive of this cause, and here they are enabling surveillance of that cause.”

For some organizers, surveillance represents a type of violence in itself. Black activism and mass resistance to anti-Black racism have historically been treated as a threat to national security by federal law enforcement. The FBI has a history of surveillance of Black activists, so surveillance stokes fear that the government is targeting them. Indeed, The Intercept reported in early June that several people in Tennessee were “intimidated at home and work” and questioned about Antifa after posting on social media about BLM rallies.

But it’s not just the FBI that organizers are concerned about. Biddle showed evidence of local police departments monitoring social media with help from the private sector. In August, PublicSource, a Pittsburgh-based nonprofit digital newsroom focused on public service reporting and analysis, reported that Pittsburgh police used social media to identify and compile evidence against suspects in crimes allegedly related to BLM protests. Pictures of protesters taken from social media were compared to a website that has a database of driver’s license photos and photos from correctional agencies and other criminal justice institutions. A public information officer for the Pittsburgh Police Department told PublicSource in an email statement that the department “does not own the technology,” but that law enforcement agencies throughout Pennsylvania had access to the tool.

But social media monitoring isn’t a black and white issue. While this type of intelligence work has been misused to target people of color as part of police surveillance, social media posts are also being used to identify the perpetrators of the Capitol siege. That might seem difficult to reconcile but it shouldn’t be, because any tool — or system — can be used to benefit or disadvantage particular groups. Some might argue that the tool itself should be abandoned given its potential for harm; others just want the tool to work well for them, not against them.

Biddle remains concerned about police surveillance hiding behind “private sector curtains,” especially if police outsource this work to the private sector, with companies prioritizing profit and not being held accountable to the public. “To me, that’s the bigger picture problem,” he says. “You have the immediate harms of undue police scrutiny and police surveillance, but then there’s just a bigger question of, why should we be having companies that are accountable to a boardroom doing the police’s dirty work?”

In October, Biddle reported that Dataminr was targeting communities of color, writing that “company insiders say their surveillance efforts were often nothing more than garden-variety racial profiling, powered not primarily by artificial intelligence but by a small army of human analysts conducting endless keyword searches.” Biddle spoke with sources inside Dataminr who suggested the company has sometimes used “prejudice-prone tropes and hunches to determine who, where, and what looks dangerous.”

One service Dataminr provides to police is flagging

potential gang members, information compiled by poring over social media, that police can add to their databases. Critics say the databases are poorly kept, riddled with errors, and based on factors like the criminalization of children, overly harsh sentencing, and biased policing. In a written statement sent through a public relations firm, Dataminr said it “rejects in the strongest possible terms the suggestion that its news alerts are in any way related to the race or ethnicity of social media users” and denied its actions constituted surveillance.

**THE ENVIRONMENTAL PORTRAIT APPROACH**

**W**ashington Post reporter Arelis R. Hernández, after covering George Floyd’s funeral, was talking to residents in the public housing projects in Houston’s historically Black Third Ward neighborhood where Floyd grew up when she had a thought: “I would hate for the story of George and of this community to be one-dimensional, or the story of George’s life to be only about his death.”

Hernandez had a conversation with someone named “Miss Cookie” who lived in the neighborhood. That conversation didn’t initially seem like story material, but then the woman said that, when she saw what happened to Floyd, she saw her son. “She was basically preaching on her porch, and I was there to listen,” Hernández says. “And that conversation on her porch stayed with me for a long time. When I came home from Houston, I couldn’t shake it.”

Hernández — who grew up in Prince George County, a predominantly Black community in Maryland that, like Houston’s Third Ward, has a rich, complicated, and problematic history — got her news chops in Orlando working as a breaking news reporter. “You get good at finding people and information quickly,” she says. But she wanted opportunities “to get off the hamster wheel and ask: Why are we doing this? Can we go deeper?”

On the breaking news beat, Hernández spoke with many grieving families, learning that murder victims “are full people deserving of dignity and respect, and the story isn’t just about their death.”

Hernández brought that ethos with her to The Washington Post and to the massive reporting team behind “George Floyd’s America,” which focuses on his life and the many inequities and institutional injustices he suffered in his 46 years. The series explores the role systemic racism played in his life, from the subpar education system that failed him to the impoverished housing project and over-policed communities in which he lived to the companies and communities that profited from his prison stints and failed substance abuse programs. Hernández published a piece in the series in late October titled “A knee on his neck” that chronicles how “police were a part of George Floyd’s life from beginning to end, an experience uncommon for most Americans, except other Black men.” She doesn’t describe Floyd’s death until the very end.

The story shows how Floyd, who had issues with mental health and addiction and struggled to maintain stable work, was apprehended frequently on minor of-



fenses, made bail, and often took plea deals, part of what the piece describes as “a revolving door to jail.”

The idea for the series grew out of a decision among a group of reporters and editors working on police violence that they didn’t want to just ask what happened to George Floyd but why. The team tried to take what Hernández calls “an environmental portrait approach, where we’re asking questions in a way a daily story would not have rendered.”

“The team decided that we should take a step back and think about his life and what his life could tell us about systemic racism in this country,” says the Post’s managing editor of diversity and inclusion Krissah Thompson.

One challenge for Hernández was sorting through all the rumors about George Floyd’s life and what people thought about his death to get a more textured view. Hernández had to be careful to let the reporting lead her “and not any preconceived notion about what the story should say.” That meant immersing herself in the community that raised him and saving space for Floyd’s friends, family, and members of the community to speak their truths. Hernández had the benefit of time to build rapport rather than just parachuting in and out for Floyd’s funeral in Houston, talking to other community members about their experiences with police and systemic racism.

She looked up his court record, not to paint him as someone with a sketchy past, but to understand the role that police and the justice system had played in his life. Hernández also spoke with friends of his, including

those who witnessed Floyd’s legal issues and struggles to improve his life, to provide greater context. Her story also juxtaposes Floyd’s run-ins with the law with the Houston Police Department’s problems with racism, corruption, and police misconduct during Floyd’s life, including officers punished with probation for serious offenses like homicide and civil rights violations. It was hard getting that context from police, who were often unwilling to talk, but she eventually found a few Black former Houston police chiefs who acknowledged the issues and gave more insight into the challenges they faced trying to reform the department.

What kept the story on track was having a team passionate about the subject, time to collaborate, a project manager to coordinate multimedia, and dedicated editors like Thompson — who is from Houston herself, so had an ear for what is authentic from that place — who believed in the story. The project was also helped by the diversity of the reporters and editors working on it. “Diversity always matters, especially in tackling a subject like systemic racism; you want a variety of perspectives,” Thompson says.

News organizations often perpetuate injustice against “and further harm communities we’re attempting to tell stories about in neglecting to report on the formula for why things happen the way they do,” says Hernández. “The danger is that we rely on what we think is the conventional wisdom to explain why things happen, missing out on the role systems and institutions have on these terrible outcomes for people, particularly Black people and people of color. And the harm is we lose trust with the communities we cover.” ■

**Protesters clash with police in Chicago during demonstrations following George Floyd’s death**

JIM YONDRUSKA/URPHOTO VIA THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

# “WHAT IF THE PROCESS ITSELF IS UNFAIR?”

CRIMINAL JUSTICE REPORTER **WESLEY LOWERY** ON RETHINKING CRIME COVERAGE, HOW THE LOSS OF LOCAL JOURNALISM AFFECTS THE BEAT, AND MORE

**W**esley Lowery was just 25 when The Washington Post won a Pulitzer for “Fatal Force,” a database of deadly police shootings in the U.S., in 2016. Lowery, then the Post’s national correspondent covering law enforcement and justice, was the driving force behind the project.

In 2020, Lowery joined CBS News as a “60 Minutes” correspondent, and he is also a contributing editor to The Marshall Project. He is the author of “They Can’t Kill Us All: Ferguson, Baltimore, and a New Era in America’s Racial Justice Movement.” Lowery spoke with the Nieman Foundation about criminal justice reporting during a February talk. Edited excerpts:

## ON RETHINKING CRIMINAL JUSTICE REPORTING

**Wesley Lowery:** I think that one of the biggest biases that we, not just as journalists but as humans, bring to any system or any structure is the assumption that the system in some way works as is.

We’ve seen this play out in a very short and quick timeline with the understanding of policing and police shootings. In 2014, I remember being on the ground in Ferguson, where the kind of consensus establishment wisdom was, if the police officer did anything wrong, they’ll charge him with a crime.

We now fast forward what has been six, seven years, and we’ve seen enough cases play out and we’ve done enough reporting where



it is clear and obvious that an officer doing something wrong does not, in fact, ensure they will be charged with a crime, much less convicted of a crime, much less fired.

For so long, there was built-in assumption that the system as is must work. We should let the process play out. What if the process in and of itself is unfair, is biased, doesn’t speak to what should happen?

In some ways, our job as journalists is to monitor and referee not just the people but the process. Our pressure and our interrogation can be something that creates fair or more just processes.

## ON BEING TOO RELIANT ON OFFICIAL SOURCING

One thing I think about with criminal justice reporting in general is that the vast majority of criminal justice reporting — and frankly most deadline reporting —

is done when the least amount of information is available.

If someone is stabbed on my street today, it will be written up and covered in all the D.C. publications. When the person is arrested, maybe it gets a blurb. When the person goes to court, all the details are spread out, but the chances of it actually being written up in any substantive way are almost zero.

That, in its nature, results in coverage that is incomplete, that is missing details. We are reliant solely on the early reports coming from the system itself, from the police and the prosecutor.

What we know from having covered these institutions is they themselves often will change their story over the course of a case. They will get new information. They will find something new out.

This is very difficult, and I’m very sympathetic and understanding of the position that a lot of reporters working in a daily news cycle are placed in.

The problems are not necessarily with individual reporters but, oftentimes, the system and the premises of how we are doing this reporting where we are very reliant on official government sourcing and on a closeness to that sourcing.

What we know as journalists on any beat is that it can be very difficult to maintain critical relationships with people with whom we get that close or for whom our livelihoods are that tied.

Now the secondary question is, ‘Okay, so who are the winners and losers in a process that is

so reliant on official sources, on quick-moving narratives, on lack of follow-up when details are available?’

In most cases, it’s the people who are at the bottom of the power totem pole as it relates to the criminal justice issues, the people who the police are falsely declaring a suspect, or who prosecutors are over-charging.

What we know about the way the criminal justice system in America works is that’s going to disproportionately leave Black and brown people underserved or missed by the journalism we’re doing.

The best journalism is done when the most information’s available, when everyone and all the stakeholders in a piece have had an opportunity to speak.

The vast majority of criminal justice coverage, especially in that daily context, makes almost no effort whatsoever to reach the suspect, much less victim, of whatever the crime is. It’s almost always power, government, police-driven narrative.

There’s no other context in which we would be okay with that journalistically. I think that’s something that we, as an industry, need to think about.

## ON ABOLISHING THE CRIME BEAT

I think there’s a real conversation to be had about, ‘How do we serve the communities we’re supposed to be covering, and what is our role? What is the point of doing this type of coverage?’

I think one of the worst reasons to do anything is because this is what we’ve always done. No matter what that is, no matter what that means. When you look at the way we cover crime, it’s the heartbeat of what we’ve always done. I think we’re in an important moment where we can stop, interrogate that a bit, ask each other our questions, and figure out, ‘What’s the purpose of this work that we’re doing?’

What I also say is that I view the criminal justice beat as a government accountability beat.



For the average American, the most powerful person they ever interact with is the local police officer. What we know and what we believe as a premise and a value of journalism is that powerful people require watchdogs. They require accountability. We should be asking questions.

## ON HOW CRIME COVERAGE DRIVES UNNECESSARY FEAR

Every single study that I know of that’s ever been done on this has found that the average American believes crime is going up and is much worse than it is because [of how] the media presents crime. If a crime occurs, it’s a news story.

If we wrote every single day about each homeless person we encountered, the country might have a different perception of how urgent the homelessness issue is, but we don’t. We write about every stabbing, every car robbing, every drunken disorderly. By their very nature, people, when they see something frequently, believe that that frequency is correlated to depth of a problem.

There’s a lot to be said about that. Most news organizations cover crime more consistently than any other thing. We do need to think in smart ways about what message that sends to our readers, how that starts to prime them to

be concerned about issues of crime and race.

## ON CRIME COVERAGE AND THE LOSS OF LOCAL JOURNALISM

When we did the “Murder with Impunity” project at the Post, I was actually surprised by how many murders we looked at. We built a database of 65,000 murders across 60 major cities, and many of these homicides had never been written about once. You could be murdered in a major American city in 2011, and what happened in the case never enters the public record.

In 1932, my great-grandfather on my dad’s side in rural North Carolina had a dispute with the white man whose land he sharecropped, and the white man murdered him. I can read the daily coverage of the trial in the local newspaper. I know more about my great-grandfather’s murder in the early 1900s than the average murder in Chicago this week. More will have entered the public record about it. I do think that’s a problem.

That speaks to the way we don’t have local journalism the way we used to. The High Country Times that covered my great-grandfather’s murder doesn’t exist anymore in Denver, North Carolina. I do think it’s important for us to be providing that coverage. ■

**People gather during a prayer walk in 2016 for Angela Parks, who was killed by her roommate. The Washington Post’s “Murder with Impunity” project found that few murders in the North Omaha neighborhood where Parks lived resulted in arrests**

THE VAST MAJORITY OF CRIME REPORTING IS DONE WHEN THE LEAST AMOUNT OF INFORMATION IS AVAILABLE

REGGIE CUNNINGHAM  
OPPOSITE: MATT DIXON/OMAHA WORLD-HERALD



# TO CHANGE ITS FUTURE, THE KANSAS

# CITY STAR EXAMINED ITS RACIST PAST

**“THE TRUTH IN BLACK AND WHITE” FORCED THE NEWSROOM TO LOOK INWARD AND TO DO JOURNALISM DIFFERENTLY** BY MARÁ ROSE WILLIAMS

**The evening before I headed out to cover a Black Lives Matter protest last May for The Kansas City Star, I listened to and read media coverage about out-of-control mobs looting and vandalizing stores, overturning parked cars, and throwing objects at police.**

What I saw the next afternoon near Kansas City’s Country Club Plaza shopping district were hundreds of sign-toting protesters of various ages and ethnicities. They chanted and screamed their opposition to police brutality against Black men and women. They directed their anger at officers in riot gear lined up two- and three-deep around the protest area. One step or slip from

the sidewalk into the street and police threw protesters to the ground, handcuffed them, and herded them into the back of a cruiser. Police repeatedly doused the chanting, but not violent, crowd with chemical repellents.

Such protests played out around the country last spring after the police killings of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and other unarmed Black people. Even after nearly 40 years as a journalist, I found the Plaza scene chilling, but not at all what I’d heard reported the night before. From my vantage point, police — not protesters — were the agitators.

Later, after scrubbing the chemical repellent from my face and hands, I became emotional. It was one of those moments when the story grabs hold of your gut, ties it in knots and tugs. Sickening.

The events of the spring were painful for a lot of people, including Black reporters covering this movement and the resistance to it. It’s been challenging because it’s not possible to shed your Blackness. It’s more than skin deep. I deeply felt that protest, from the perspective of the protesters.

When the anger — that in 2020 we were still fighting

THE KANSAS CITY STAR

racism, systemic and overt — subsided to a slow burn, it became clear that what I had actually witnessed that afternoon was Kansas City joining a national movement, ready to tussle with racial injustice in all its forms. This Black reporter wanted a piece of that; writing about one spring afternoon protest was not enough.

I was fairly certain that newspapers across the country had played a role for decades in perpetuating racism through their coverage — and lack of coverage — of Black people, Black culture, Black lives. With the country in the midst of a reckoning on race, I thought, what better time than now for the Star, one of the most prestigious news organizations in the Midwest, to take an accounting of its role in spreading the racist attitudes woven into the fabric of this country to oppress an entire people.

I wasn’t the only one tugging at that thread. A metro editor at the Star had a similar thought: The paper needed to make a statement about its racist past.

I proposed, first in an email to top editors and then in a conference call, that the Star make a public apology for our failure to adequately and accurately tell the rich stories of Black people’s contributions in Kansas City. Apologize for rendering Black Kansas City all but invisible.

We had to admit what we did was wrong and show readers exactly how we failed with a series of stories ex-

posing the racist language and racist slants that had filled our pages as far back as the 1800s when the Star and its sister paper, The Kansas City Times, began. It would mean months of research, including examining stacks of court records and hundreds of archived papers. It would require identifying, locating, and interviewing Black Kansas Citians who were the subject of some of the incidents about which we wrote.

We began with a focus group of longtime community leaders and got their takes on what we hoped to do. Black residents, they said, don’t trust the mainstream newspaper because they see nothing in it that tells their story. For decades, the only time they saw themselves in our pages was as perpetrators or victims of crime. In Kansas City, Black residents read *The Call*, a weekly Black-owned paper.

Star leadership realized this project meant we would open ourselves to scrutiny of everything we might do related to race going forward, not just in our coverage but in hiring and community engagement as well. “Let’s do it,” said Mike Fannin, the Star’s president and editor.

Reporters, photographers, and editors were tapped for ideas on what historic moments should be reviewed to gauge how or if the Star had included Black citizens in its coverage. The entire staff recognized this project would not stop at publication. It would be an ongoing effort involving every one of them.

This project was meant to reveal a wrong and pro-

voke community and industry change. We hoped other news operations nationally, and businesses and agencies locally, would also look inward and make amends. But more importantly, we hoped it would change the way we ourselves do business.

Reporters were eager to get on board. To make it work, for about seven months, the four reporters researching and writing the stories were given time for the project on rotation — two weeks on daily news followed by two weeks on the project.

While reporters worked, guided by supervising editors, top editors hired the paper’s first ever race and equity editor and began putting together an advisory group that would eventually work with staff to identify stories and issues of impact to minority communities in Kansas City. The project — “The Truth in Black and White” — published on December 20 as a front-page apology from Fannin followed by six stories about The Star’s failures, including pieces on how the paper stayed quiet as Kansas City schools broke federal desegregation law for decades and how Black neighborhoods were ignored in reporting on a devastating 1977 flood.

The lion’s share of the reader response was from people thanking and praising the paper. Others called

it performance and wanted to know what real change would come of it. Would the Star hire more people of color and write more positive stories about people of color and the communities where they live?

Yes and yes. We also have started a ‘news in education’ effort with city public schools and launched a series of virtual events with the public library to connect with the community.

But the real change is what happened when my colleagues and I discovered the depth of racism that had existed. Discovered that, until his death in 1955, the Star hadn’t written about native son and famed jazz musician Charlie Parker. And that when four Black men, and possibly two others, were shot by police during a 1968 civil rights protest, the Star painted unflattering portraits of each of them. And, when writing about Black school children, who as late as 1977 were segregated from white students in public schools, referred to them as “a problem.”

For decades when Black people were written about, if it wasn’t about crime, it tended to be belittling and mocking. The Star rarely ran photos of Black residents, and too often talked about Black people, not to them.

More than once during the research I wept. The project stirred my and my colleagues’ journalist souls.

We will approach every story we write differently. We will question our intentions, use of language, placement of stories, and decisions about what we cover and what we don’t. Doing this project changed the way each of us does day-to-day journalism. ■

**OPPOSITE: When covering Kansas City race riots in 1968, The Kansas City Star provided no original reporting about the six people — all Black — who were killed during the unrest**

# CHANGING STANDARDS FOR CHANGING TIMES

WITH “FRESH START,” THE BOSTON GLOBE WEIGHS THE NEWS VALUE OF OLDER ARTICLES VERSUS INDIVIDUAL HARM BY JASON TUOHEY

**Should a single mistake define you for the rest of your life? That’s the central question behind “Fresh Start,” a new initiative at The Boston Globe where we allow people named in older stories to appeal their presence in our pages.**

At first glance, the effort may sound antithetical for a daily newspaper. After all, publications like ours have a long history of fighting to make information public, and of publishing information that some might prefer to stay hidden.

But times change, and as journalists, we must change with them.

In the past, a Globe story about a minor crime or embarrassing incident would often be relegated to “back-of-the-section” placement in the newspaper. Because of the daily nature of print, the story would be read by some and then quickly forgotten when the next day’s edition arrived. This wouldn’t mean the entire case would be wiped from the public record: You could still find the story by searching archives at the library, or from other archival sources. But the story — and those featured in it — would not remain easily discoverable for years to come.

That’s no longer the case. The runaway power of search engines and other technologies puts a vast amount of information at the fingertips of anyone with a functional Internet connection. For some private citizens, that means one minor event in their past documented by The Boston Globe could appear at the top of a search result of their name. Forever. The global behemoths behind these technologies offer no recourse to someone affected by their platforms; often, one can’t even find contact information on their websites to log a complaint.

Furthermore, the decision to cover a minor crime or incident has always been inherently unequal and random. Anyone who has ever worked the cop beat knows that the severity of the crimes you cover depends, in part, on what else happens that night. The Globe, like every other metro publication in the country, does not have the bandwidth to follow every single crime in our region to conclusion as they wend through various legal systems. And, as the uprising that followed George Floyd’s killing made clear, our nation has a long history of applying law enforcement unequally to communities of color, an injustice that has no doubt been reflected in our coverage of local policing over the years.

Through no intent of our own, many minor stories on our websites, some years old, now immortalize the worst decisions and moments in regular people’s lives. We’ve heard from subjects over the years who tell us that one story, camped at the top of a search result for their name, has become a barrier for employment, relationships, and educational opportunities. This was never the goal of our journalism, to apply a permanent stain haphazardly and unequally to an individual for the rest of time.

Enter “Fresh Start.” A 10-person committee of journalists spent months defining the scope of the initiative, speaking with community leaders and criminal justice experts to help formulate processes and procedures for how to consider cases from people affected by these stories. We also reached out to other newsrooms who’d crafted similar programs, including Cleveland.com, which has been an early leader in this area.

Here’s how it works: A person who is mentioned in a prior story can fill out a form on our website to request that we take a look at their case. The applicant provides the link to the story, any relevant documents, a few identifying characteristics, and an explanation as to why this story is causing them harm.

Requests must come directly from individuals. Lawyers cannot file a case on behalf of a client; we don’t want to give someone privileged enough to hire legal representation an edge. And we won’t accept claims from corporations or government agencies. This pro-



ERASER: HURST/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO  
MUGSHOTS: BROCKTON POLICE DEPARTMENT

gram is meant to help individuals, not to clear away information that holds powerful organizations accountable for their actions. We also maintain a higher standard of consideration for people in positions of public trust, such as politicians, police officers, or teachers.

Our committee reviews every case individually, weighing a number of factors: Were charges dismissed? Was there a conviction? How severe was the crime? Was this an isolated incident, or part of a larger pattern? One of the most important questions we seek to answer is: Does the news value of the story currently outweigh the harm being done to an individual?

While we review every case, we act only on some. For those cases we deem to have merit, we have a number of options for resolution, which include: Adding an editor’s note or an update to a story; removing the article from search engine results; and anonymizing an individual mentioned in the story. In extreme cases, we

may consider removing a story entirely from our website. All decisions are ultimately made by the Globe at its own editorial discretion.

Our process, while well-considered, will necessarily evolve. We don’t pretend to have all the answers, so we plan to solicit feedback from the community and keep open minds in the early stages of this initiative.

The program has been lauded by some, particularly from the field of criminal justice reform. We’ve also heard from traditionalists who feel uneasy about the precedent we’re setting for news publications.

We understand that unease. We’re not in the business of rewriting the past. But we can’t dogmatically hold on to outdated practices and standards, either, in the face of changing circumstances.

With “Fresh Start,” we’re taking a bold step to ensure our coverage of someone’s past doesn’t unfairly hinder their ability to shape their future. ■

# DIVERSE SOURCES, INCLUSIVE REPORTING

## FOUR WAYS TO INCREASE THE DIVERSITY OF YOUR SOURCES BY MELBA NEWSOME

**In the wake of the police killing of George Floyd and the increased prominence of the Black Lives Matter movement, editors across the country have made a concerted effort to hire more Black reporters, include more Black authoritative voices, and recount the real-life experiences of people of color impacted by systemic racism.**

Increasing the diversity of the sources we use and the people we feature is the first and most significant step in creating journalism that paints a more complete picture and is more relevant to audiences.

Since March 2020, as part of a Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute fellowship, I've been developing a training curriculum on ways to make reporting more reflective of the communities we cover. But when I started, I had no idea how timely — or how challenging — this project would be.

When I proposed my diverse sources project, I believed the biggest obstacle would be getting newsrooms and journalists to accept that this was a worthwhile investment of scarce resources. That turned out to be the easy part, however. Most reputable news organizations understand that being more inclusive is not only the right thing to do, it is also good for business.

But including new and/or different authoritative voices in our reporting, particularly women and people of color, is not as easy as one might think. In fact, my biggest hurdle was convincing them to participate as sources. I was turned down for a variety of reasons. If we are to overcome the barriers to increasing source diversity, we must understand what those barriers are, why they exist, and how we can overcome them.

Recent media analyses have found that there is a trust deficit between Blacks and the media. A 2020 study from the Center for Media Engagement at UT Austin's Moody College of Communication revealed that Black

people are largely distrustful about how the media portrays Black communities. This lack of trust is largely due to the lack of continued engagement. Reporters who parachute into a community to cover a volatile situation, without any established ties or understanding of that community, are likely to encounter indifference at best and hostility at worst. When people and communities are only news because they are in crisis, this paints an incomplete and/or one-sided portrait.

Last summer's social justice protests prompted a sustained media focus on the ways systemic racism plays out in America. Researchers who had been writing about these issues for years, with little interest from mainstream media, suddenly found their dance cards full.

Even those who had been denied space or a voice in established institutions and publications were suddenly bombarded with requests for media interviews, opportunities to participate in forums, or asked for guidance about what steps to take to correct past wrongs. These entreaties from well-funded organizations and white reporters mostly came without any offer of compensation.

One academic described it this way to me: "We've been toiling in this vineyard for decades trying to get somebody to pay attention to social justice and these systemic racism issues, but no one cared. Now that it's a hot topic, you want to come in, pick my brain, and get the benefit of all my hard work for free. No, thanks."

ABC News senior producer Jasmine Brown — who is working on crowdsourcing a database of diverse sources



— has seen this dynamic play out. "In the days after the Floyd incident, you saw a ton of Black academics, but there is also burnout," she says. "When you're an expert on this issue, and you have been living it and reviewing it every single day of your life, that can be hard."

Factors like these can make diverse sources reluctant to engage with journalists, as I discovered in an article exploring how the coronavirus impacted kidney disease and transplant procedures. In developing the piece, I realized that, although Blacks are three times as likely to suffer from the disease as whites, my reporting included no authoritative Black voices.

This led me to seek the opinion of a Black female epidemiologist with extensive experience in this field. The PR gatekeeper was excited about the opportunity but later said the epidemiologist couldn't meet my deadline. I offered to extend it. Her answer was still no.

It took some prodding, but the rep eventually came clean: The epidemiologist simply refused to participate because she objected to being "used." A couple of months earlier, the rep told me, the epidemiologist's employer had created a video designed to recruit students from underrepresented groups into its bridge program. Only after it was complete did someone realize that the 12 people featured were all white. They tried to remedy this by including her at the last minute. She refused to be "tokenized." This backstory explained why she believed my interview request was merely performative.

Former Charlotte Observer associate editor Mary Newsom believes experts and academics, especially people of color, are reluctant to share their opinions in the media because they worry about backlash. "It's a real concern that a public statement by a Black person is going to risk a lot more blowback, and a lot of people just don't want to be a target," says Newsom.

Being willing to open yourself up to ridicule or harassment takes courage, particularly when it concerns a

divisive or inflammatory issue. But this kind of invective is not limited to topics that are obviously about race. In the current climate, every subject is politicized. Those who come down on one side or the other are subject to attack and harassment by those who disagree.

Regardless of their CVs, many people of color, especially women, don't see themselves as qualified to offer an expert opinion or insight. During a panel at the 2019 International Journalism Festival called "Amplifying Women's Authoritative Voice in Media," Laura Zalenko, senior executive editor of Bloomberg Editorial, said that one obstacle to remedying the underrepresentation of women was women themselves.

An internal audit revealed that just 10% of guests on Bloomberg TV were women and only 2.5% of the top news stories cited a woman expert. Those dismal numbers drove Bloomberg to develop a broader initiative to include more women, but the outlet encountered an unexpected problem. "One of the concerns that we were hearing was that some of the women that we were trying to bring on TV said that they weren't prepared or comfortable doing that," said Zalenko.

Inclusive reporting may not be easy, but it is essential. Here are a few ways journalists can get around the objections of potential sources.

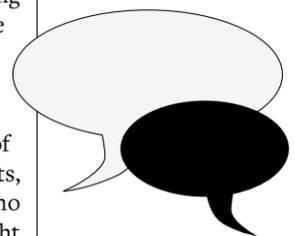
**Redefine who is an expert.** In a pre-training survey I conducted to gauge journalists' attitudes about source diversity, most respondents said they rely on resumes, credentials, and formal training in a particular area to determine who's an expert. If we broaden our definition of who qualifies as an expert to include lived experience and people who are impacted by the issues, this greatly expands the voices we can include.

**Lay the groundwork first.** If possible, try to recruit new sources before you actually need them in a story to avoid making a cold approach when you're on deadline.

**Explain the process.** Few non-media people know what to expect when they agree to be interviewed. Part of our job as journalists is to explain the processes for a print media outlet versus online versus broadcast. Set expectations by letting them know that an hour-long interview might produce one quote, or they might be left out of the story altogether. This way, when the assignment is over, the source doesn't feel misled and might be willing to be interviewed again.

**Practice cultural competence.** The notion of cultural competence is not just for white journalists, says inclusive media consultant Linda Miller, who helped create American Public Media's Public Insight Network of diverse sources. "Understanding that different communities have different histories and experiences with the press should be the starting point for every journalist," says Miller. Fortunately, many newsrooms have created training and outreach activities to help the staff develop the awareness and skills necessary to actually listen, engage, and build empathy for someone else's experiences, the central tenet of cultural competence.

Incorporating new and diverse sources in our reporting is well worth the effort, even if they need some convincing. ■



# WHERE CLIMATE AND RACE COVERAGE MEET

Environmental  
justice reporting  
chronicles how  
the climate crisis,  
racial inequity, and  
government policy  
impact vulnerable  
communities

BY RACHEL RAMIREZ



# W

hen Yvette Cabrera was reporting an inves-

tigative series about undocumented minors in Southern California’s juvenile justice system, who were being referred by the probation department to immigration authorities, she noticed a disturbing pattern. Many of the young men struggled with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

“I started asking myself, is there a potential story here?” Cabrera says. “When we think about the environment that these young boys grew up in and the challenges they face, a lot of it revolves around the built environment and also environments that have been brought on by heavy police presence in neighborhoods that are high poverty and have other types of challenges.”

The question led Cabrera on a long reporting journey, where she discovered a serious environmental issue baked into the urban fabric of the neighborhoods in which the boys grew up: lead exposure.

A slew of studies have found that lead exposure, even at low levels, affects children’s cognitive abilities. Cabrera reached out to Howard Mielke, a lead expert at Tulane University, who has pioneered studies on lead exposure for decades, to walk her through his research.

After more reporting, Cabrera decided she wanted to take soil samples around the California neighborhoods where the undocumented minors grew up. With the training and assistance of Massachusetts-based company Thermo Fisher Scientific, Cabrera was able to test more than 1,000 soil samples from 2015 to 2016, followed by more soil test analysis and reporting. In 2017, she went on to work as an investigative reporter at ThinkProgress, where she published a five-part investigative series on the hidden toxic legacy of childhood lead exposure across the country.

The issues of environmental injustice and environmental racism remain largely absent in the daily news cycle. Environmental justice reporting — journalism that holds polluting industries to account and reports on vulnerable communities impacted by climate or environmental disasters and policies — is not just about the wildfires blanketing vast swaths of the American West or the record-breaking number of hurricanes inundating the Gulf region. It’s also about how these climate catastrophes add to the underlying environmental health hazards, such as rampant industrial pollution or military contamination, that are often intentionally integrated in marginalized communities.

Cabrera, now a senior reporter at Grist, is continuing her lead crisis series, mapping out the historical legacies of racist city planning policies that may have contributed to high sources of lead in these neighborhoods. These systemic disparities, according to Robert Bullard, professor of urban planning and environmental policy at Texas Southern University and a leading thinker on environmental justice, can be traced back to racist segregation policies such as redlining, the government-sanctioned effort to segregate communities of color by denying them housing loans and insurance.

Redlining has a history of depriving communities of neighborhood investment, labeling them “hazardous” mostly due to racial covenants and intentional lack of resources that further led to economic downturns, aging infrastructure, and environmental harms like high levels of lead in the soil. A 2019 study in the journal *Climate*, in fact, found that redlining is actually a major predictor of which neighborhoods suffer the most from extreme heat. White, wealthier neighborhoods tend to have more community investment, such as green spaces that cool the area, while poor and formerly redlined neighborhoods are slotted next to freeways and industrial areas.

“When you look at all the maps in the last 40 years — the Covid-19 map, maps of redlining, the map of extreme heat, map of food deserts, and so on — it’s the same map of disparities,” Bullard says. “That’s not a coincidence.”

After being long overlooked, environmental justice

PREVIOUS SPREAD: BRITTANY GREESON/THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX  
GILES CLARKE/GETTY IMAGES



**A cemetery in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in an area known as “Cancer Alley,” stands in stark contrast to the chemical plants that surround it**

reporting is becoming more mainstream, prompted in part by the Covid-19 pandemic, the renewed calls for racial justice in the wake of the police killing of George Floyd, and the increasingly alarming effects of the climate crisis. Environmental justice reporting demonstrates that the issue of environmental racism impinges on every story — whether it’s race, housing, economics, healthcare, or immigration.

One of the first things environmental justice reporter Nina Lakhani did at *The Guardian* was to define environmental justice based on her early conversations with activists, scientists, and community members: “It is about who gets access and who doesn’t get access to clean air, to green areas, to healthy food, and to clean, safe, and affordable water,” she says. “As a starting point, that’s the definition I got from talking to veterans of environmental justice, mainly Black, Native, and brown activists, academics, lawyers, all sorts of folks who for many years have been talking about environmental racism, environmental inequality, and how communities of color, Native American communities in poor areas, are used as sacrifice, so they can be collateral damage.”

In 2020, with newsrooms pivoting to extensive coverage of the pandemic, which has now killed more than 500,000 Americans and has disproportionately impacted people of color, many outlets missed an opportunity to connect air pollution to severe Covid-19 outcomes. A Harvard study released in April 2020, followed by an analysis by researchers from ProPublica and

the State University of New York (SUNY) published in September, both found a close correlation between high levels of hazardous air pollutants and high Covid-19 mortality rates — which perhaps isn’t surprising given scientific research has long supported the connection between certain health conditions, including asthma and even cancer, and exposure to air pollution.

An analysis by nonprofit Media Matters for America found that, during a four-week period from the end of March to the end of April 2020, only 7% of the 239 broadcast and cable TV news segments that covered the disproportionate Covid-19 death rates among people of color made the link to air pollution and other environmental hazards. In 2019, a report by The Solutions Project, an organization focused on climate solutions, found that while communities of color are disproportionately saddled with dirty emissions from the fossil fuel industry, only 2% of 2,300 analyzed articles on renewable energy referenced communities of color, down from 7% in 2018. That year, lawmakers in states like New York were moving to pass climate and environmental justice legislation that would prioritize disadvantaged communities when it comes to clean energy.

Even George Floyd’s final words “I can’t breathe” became part of the rallying cry for the environmental justice movement that resurrected the National Black Environmental Justice Network, which Bullard co-founded. For Black people living near industrial facilities, the plea adds a layer of meaning when it comes

**“WHEN YOU LOOK AT ALL THE MAPS IN THE LAST 30 YEARS — THE COVID-19 MAP, MAPS OF REDLINING, AND SO ON — IT’S THE SAME MAP OF DISPARITIES”**

**ROBERT BULLARD, NATIONAL BLACK ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE NETWORK**

to the disproportionate pollution burden they face every day, which is often ignored.

A spate of reports and studies have shown the severe environmental and health impacts of living in close proximity to oil refineries and petrochemical plants. These plants spew out tons of hazardous greenhouse gas emissions and fine particulate matter that can travel into people’s lungs, causing health conditions such as cancer and asthma. Still, during Trump’s presidency, his administration rolled back more than 100 environmental rules allowing industries to pollute further.

When it comes to connecting systemic inequities to environmental harms, many outlets have been models for covering environmental justice.

The fossil fuel industry has a history of buying out communities from their land to build mammoth petrochemical facilities and oil and gas pipelines. This is evident in oil and gas-friendly states such as Texas and Louisiana, where predominantly Black neighborhoods are tormented by the dirty air released by refineries. In southeast Louisiana, the 85-mile stretch of the Mississippi River that connects New Orleans and Baton Rouge is dubbed “Cancer Alley,” since seven out of 10 U.S. census tracts with the country’s highest cancer risks are found in this corridor, housing more than 150 plants and refineries. The area has become a major environmental justice issue since Black communities tend to live the closest to these facilities, thus suffering the most severe health conditions.

In Texas, energy companies — mostly fossil fuels — drive the economy. Amal Ahmed, now a reporter at The Texas Observer, published a story titled “How to Erase a Neighborhood” in Texas Monthly in April 2020 about the dwindling neighborhood of East End in Freeport, Texas, a petrochemical town south of Houston. Houses, churches, and residents have slowly vanished over the years due to eminent domain and the city’s plans to deepen the port’s shipping channels and grow its industrial presence.

Meanwhile, pollution has worsened in many areas. In states like Texas and Louisiana, the oil and gas industry holds a huge amount of power not just in communities but also with government officials, which makes reporting on fossil fuel and environmental accountability especially challenging. In recent years, the fossil fuel industry has been trying to paint itself as environmentally friendly and sustainable by hiring public relations teams to protect brand identity and boost public trust. Activists call this “greenwashing,” if companies provide false or misleading information claiming that their business is sustainable and eco-friendly.

The visceral description of the neighborhood of East End, which Ahmed visited, played a vital role in her reporting, witnessing firsthand the ramifications of industry build-up, such as empty lots and abandoned homes. “It’s a story that’s very much about the setting and the connections that people have to the place,” Ahmed says. “So I really wanted to get out there and talk to people in the place that they’re fighting for.”

Some environmental justice stories rely on pending lawsuits filed by environmental groups or community

advocates against industries. Just as business journalists go through Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) filings, environmental justice reporters go through lawsuits by major environmental law firms. When Ahmed pressed East End port officials with questions regarding a pending lawsuit she discovered, she was first met with zero to “no comment” responses.

In situations like this, Ahmed says, it’s important to ask questions that fully capture the efforts and measures public officials and company executives took to analyze and assess potential environmental impacts in nearby communities — if any at all.

At The Guardian, before Lakhani was hired as an environmental justice reporter, she had been covering Mexico and Central America for almost seven years. One of the key issues she’s been interested in is the battle for natural resources and the dangers Indigenous environmental defenders face across Latin America. “So many conflicts, such as forced migration and the refugee crisis, have been fueled by the battle for natural resources, particularly land and water,” Lakhani says.

Water was recognized as a national crisis in America in the wake of the contamination in Flint, Michigan, followed by Newark, New Jersey, where low-income communities of color were the most impacted. As Lakhani pored over academic research and studies about who has access to clean and safe water in America, she noticed the problem is also about who can afford water as a commodity. She came across several reports that found a growing number of Americans were not only unable to afford clean water, but that a number of measures, some of them seemingly punitive — such as water shutoffs and moratoriums, in addition to aging infrastructure, contamination, and soaring prices by public utilities — all were huge factors in the lack of accessibility.

“That was when I sort of came up with this idea to really try and get the first national snapshot of the price of water and water affordability, which are obviously connected, but not exactly the same thing,” says Lakhani, who has published a series of stories on America’s water crisis in The Guardian.

It was an ambitious investigative project, and Lakhani and the editor agreed she couldn’t do it alone. They decided, for a small amount of money, to commission Roger Colton, an economist and lawyer who specializes in the affordability of utilities, to analyze water affordability in 12 demographically diverse cities, including Philadelphia, Detroit, and New Orleans.

Colton’s comprehensive data analysis — which looked at each year between 2010 and 2018, as well as forecasts for 2030 — became the backbone of her investigation. They found water bills rising across the country and millions of households, particularly those of low-income residents of color, struggling to afford such expenses. Meanwhile, federal aid to public water utilities has decreased, posing major environmental and public health risks due to lack of maintenance in water infrastructure.

When the first part of the series was published, traffic soared: “A lot of my life is spent doing things that are really important, yet don’t necessarily get well read, but this went crazy,” Lakhani says of the first piece.

As with climate reporting, science and data are crucial aspects in environmental justice reporting. What is the source of the pollution? What level of cancer-causing chemical benzene or carbon emissions does this oil refinery emit? How is fracking bad for the environment and public health? Answers to these questions are often found by going through academic and scientific research and interviewing experts.

Against the backdrop of the pandemic and a nationwide racial reckoning, environmental justice beats are gradually emerging in newsrooms. Still, with the recent elections and insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, it can be challenging to turn the spotlight to a hard-hitting environmental justice story. But many climate and environmental justice reporters have succeeded at finding connections across various beats and topics.

At the height of the Black Lives Matter protests during the summer of 2020, InsideClimate News reporter James Bruggers published a story connecting toxic pollutants to the high mortality rate and health impacts of Black people in Kentucky, where Breonna Taylor was fatally shot by Louisville police. Bruggers, a veteran local environmental justice reporter in Louisville, used the ongoing protests and renewed calls for racial justice as a news peg, then connected them to a recent study that found living in close proximity to Rubbertown, an industrial neighborhood in the city, had a major effect on life expectancy among low-income Black residents compared to their more affluent, often white counterparts.

“I kept up with the daily demonstrations around Breonna Taylor, which did not focus on Rubbertown, but provided a compelling reason for us to take a fresh look at [pollution] as an underlying factor calling for racial equity in Louisville,” Bruggers says.

While reporting on the story, he checked in with John Gilderbloom, a University of Louisville professor who has studied the city’s inequities around health and the environment. Bruggers ended up using Gilderbloom’s new research, which found that living in industrially polluted neighborhoods explains part of Louisville’s lifespan disparity, as a major supporting detail in his reporting.

Bruggers says it’s important to know history and data: “Check the data. In this case, it meant checking on chemical plant emissions reports going back to the 1990s, finding studies in scientific journals, finding reports from the local health department, and just having a data state of mind, so that you can be sure your story is grounded in facts.”

In the story, Bruggers dug out and studied a local health department report from 2017 when city officials assessed various socio-economic factors, including the environment, and found startling disparities of as much as 10 to 12 years in life expectancy between poor and wealthy neighborhoods, particularly poor Black and white communities in industrial areas.

“Know that the world did not begin the day you start reporting a story,” Bruggers says. “History matters.”

Environmental justice reporting is all about community stories, which is why covering the issue can strike some as a type of activism. When The Guardian’s



Lakhani thinks about her approach to covering environmental justice issues, she says she first identifies the environmental problem, then proceeds to report and investigate the problem with the hope that her findings will elicit systemic changes: “I’m definitely not an activist, I’m a journalist, but I would consider myself a campaigning journalist. I get behind issues and I report on them ... I really try to make the data into a usable type of journalism.”

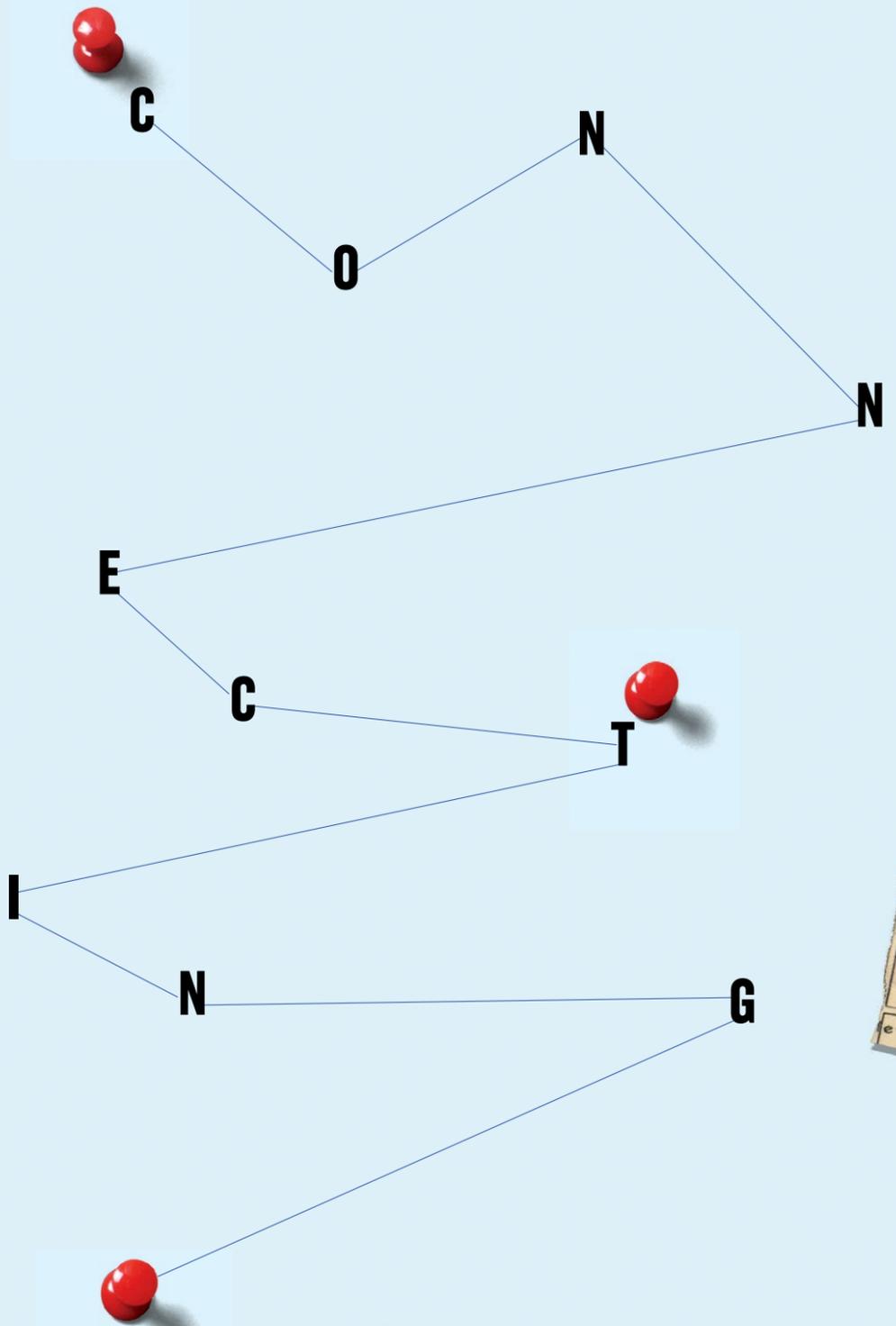
The Trump administration — which systematically attacked journalism and facts — was a particularly crucial time for environmental justice reporting. The administration not only undermined climate science, but also aligned itself with the oil industry and overhauled significant environmental regulations and policies, such as the bedrock 51-year-old National Environmental Policy Act. Most recently, the administration sold off drilling rights in parts of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska, which Indigenous people say is sacred land.

And in the wake of the nationwide protests for racial justice, newsrooms are also having their own racial reckoning. Major newsrooms like The Washington Post and USA Today have been hiring for new reporting roles that focus on racial inequities, including environmental justice. With environmental justice making its way to the forefront of climate and racial coverage, journalists like Cabrera believe that change is on the horizon.

“We know enough generally about the harmful, damaging, and ill effects of the pollution that comes from either a refinery or lead contamination,” Cabrera says. “But for many years when communities raised these concerns, they were just simply ignored, because we didn’t have any proof. And so what’s so gratifying to work on this beat now — when people are asking how can we have a fair and equitable system — is that people’s eyes are wide open and [they] are asking questions on how can we address these issues systemically.” ■

**Susan Johnson and her mother Lila Lloyd, pictured on a plot of family-owned land in Freeport, Texas, hold aerial photos of their East End neighborhood from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The East End’s residential area has disappeared over the years as the city works to expand industrial areas**

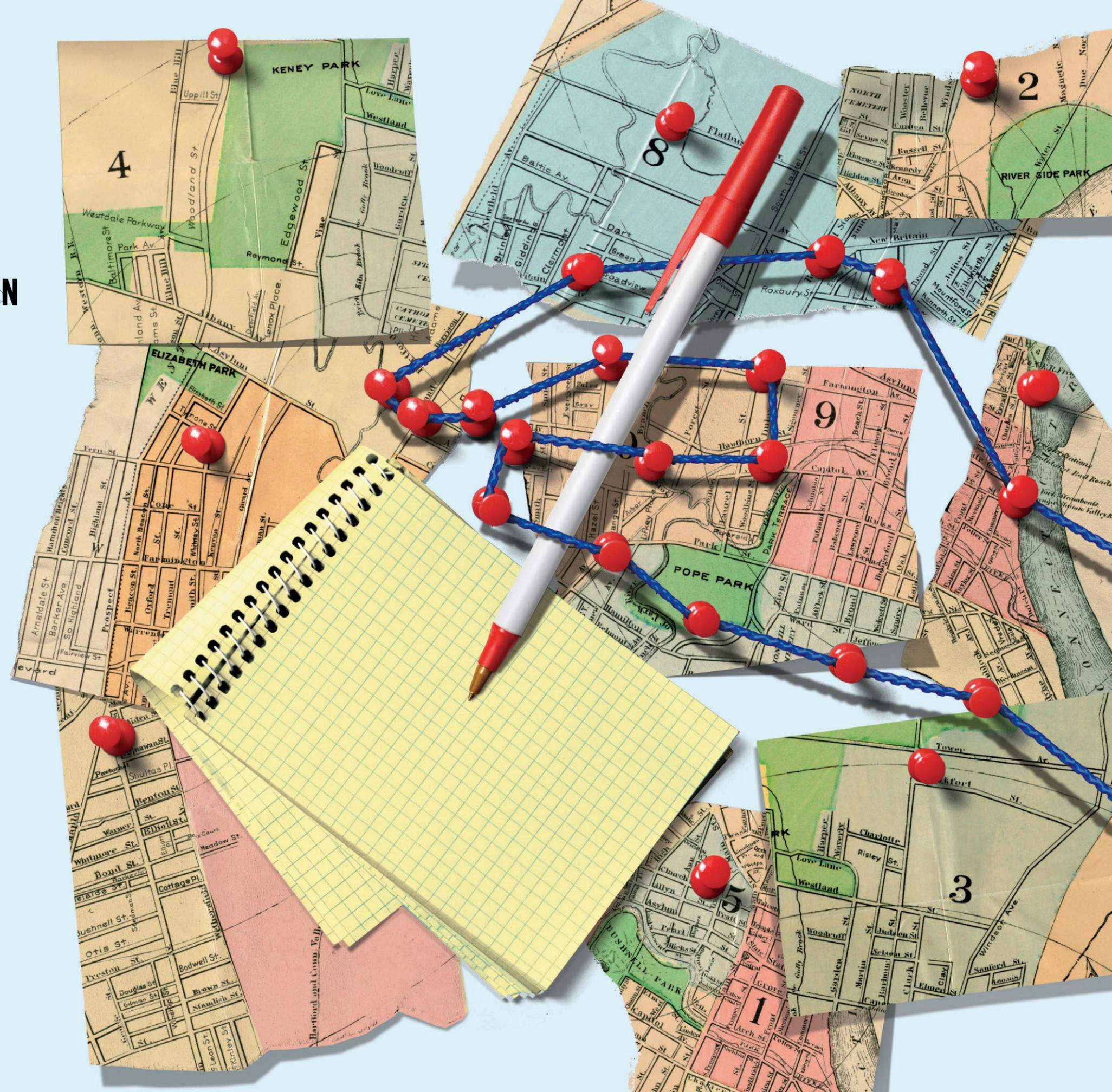
MICHAEL STARGHILL JR./REDFUX



# IN A TIME OF COVID

With the loss of physical newsrooms — either temporarily or forever — how are young journalists finding mentors and collaborators?

BY CLIO CHANG  
ILLUSTRATION BY DOUG CHAYKA





hen the pandemic hit, Emily Brindley and Alex Putterman, two young journalists at The Hartford Courant, were taken off their usual beats to report on Covid-19. What was supposed to be just a few days of a pivot quickly turned into nearly a year of them becoming the paper's lead coronavirus reporters. "We learned a lot about Covid really quickly, and it was also a pretty intense crash course in how the state government operates," Brindley, 25, says.

Their learning curve was even sharper given that they had to do it all virtually, from their homes.



While Brindley, a union officer for her guild, thinks her team has done well adapting, she notes that it wasn't the same as working together in an office. "I used to eavesdrop on interviews that other reporters were doing over the phone and listen to them talk to each other about stories they were developing. It was the best learning experience as a professional reporter," she says. "I can't imagine starting as a reporter not having that experience right now."

But now, at the Courant and elsewhere, they might have to.

Early in December, the Courant, the longest continuously running newspaper in the country, announced it was shutting down its physical newsroom. Tribune Publishing, the company that owns the paper, and that in February agreed to be acquired by its largest shareholder, the hedge fund Alden Global Capital, said that "as the company evaluates its real estate needs" during the pandemic, it made the "difficult decision" to close the offices permanently.

The paper's union put it in much more plain terms, tweeting: "This is what happens when hedge funds own newspapers."

Newsrooms have long been the traditional space where young journalists learn to report and work on the job. At their best, they can foster the type of collab-

oration and mentorship necessary for good work. But, like any workplace, they can also be marginalizing and exploitative. With the loss of these physical spaces — either temporarily or forever, as the coronavirus runs rampant and the vaccine rollout falters — how are journalists just starting out in their careers now faring?

Reporters at the more than 250-year-old Hartford Courant had already been working from home since mid-March of last year, messaging on Slack and taking virtual meetings through Microsoft Teams, but they had expected to eventually be back in the office when the pandemic was under control. Then, in October, Tribune announced it was outsourcing the Courant's printing presses, eliminating 151 jobs from the Hartford offices. "I knew at that point the office was closing," says Daniela Altimari, a statehouse reporter who has worked at the paper for more than two decades.

Still, when the official announcement came, it was a blow. "It felt like we had a light at the end of the tunnel," as Brindley puts it. "Now that light is extinguished."

As the pandemic forced media companies to close offices, journalists have had to pivot to working often entirely from home. While the closures are ostensibly temporary for many newsrooms, the Courant's situation is not isolated; Tribune Publishing also permanently shut down five other local newsroom offices

**Desks sit empty in the San Francisco Chronicle newsroom as staff work remotely amid the coronavirus pandemic**

JESSICA CHRISTIAN/THE SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE VIA POLARIS IMAGES

over the summer, including the New York Daily News and Florida's Orlando Sentinel. At Columbia Journalism Review, Ruth Maragilt documented the trend, writing that "all across the country, the coronavirus was exacerbating a hollowing-out that had been underway in journalism for the past decade. ... The latest manifestation, catalyzed by stay-at-home orders, was the elimination of newsrooms."

Zoë Jackson, a 22-year-old reporter at Minnesota's Star Tribune newspaper and Report for America corps member, moved to Minneapolis this past May to start her new job amid the pandemic and George Floyd protests. She felt lucky because she had interned at the Star Tribune the summer before, so she had already met and worked with many of the people at her office. But even with all that, Jackson says she still misses the incidental moments with colleagues: "I like coworking and being able to just walk to somebody talk to them, [to say], let's get coffee and talk about this. I really miss that."

It helps that Jackson's current editor runs through her stories with her over video chat, and they do check-ins that are not work related. "I get to see her face and we get to talk about our lives separate from the work I owe her," Jackson says. "I've been really appreciating that lately."

For many, losing a newsroom means also losing the type of serendipitous conversations that can really help a young reporter who might not have a big rolodex of sources or the same community connections. Altimari, the veteran Hartford Courant reporter, says that learning from more senior colleagues on the job was a big part of her journalistic upbringing. "We all learn from one another. Sometimes you're working on a story and your cubicle mate overhears you and will say, 'Did you talk to so-and-so; they're a great source,'" Altimari says.

Even though veteran reporters and editors are often stretched thin, Altimari says when new reporters started at the desk she worked on it was easy for her to walk by and grab a cup of coffee to get to know them and their work. Now, those moments would have to be much more formalized.

Many young journalists in local newsrooms across the country recounted a similar loss. Some only talk to their direct editor or teams, which they feel limits their experiences in learning from people across the newsroom. There's also a difference in being able to bounce ideas off people in person, versus having to do it over a video meeting.

Still, there are ways to adapt. Jackson's Star Tribune newsroom and guild have been doing social events on Zoom, which, while at times awkward, has allowed her to see the faces of some people she hasn't seen in nearly a year. Jackson especially appreciated one session where people came in to talk about working from home, recalling how colleagues shared how they've had to accept that 2020 was not their best year of work. "I'm like, wow, because I read your stories and I would never thought you felt like that," Jackson says. "It makes me feel better hearing [them] talk about that."

In normal times, young reporters might be able to

build up sources by going to school board meetings and community events. Now, some are finding it hard to develop relationships with people in the community over the phone and social media. Megan Valley, a 24-year-old education reporter with the Belleville News-Democrat in Illinois and a Report for America corps member, says that connecting with parents has been a particular challenge. "If you're doing a story about kids, it can be very sensitive. I think it's a lot easier to build trust if you're already someone people have seen around and maybe know," Valley says. One photojournalist told me about how she's had to adapt to photographing people in their homes from outside their windows.

Some young journalists have been able to get around these issues by leaning on social media and Google forms. Rachel Rohr, who runs training programs at Report for America, which places emerging journalists in local newsrooms, has organized workshops with seasoned reporters on topics from how to create sensory-laden scenes via phone interviews to how to develop virtual office hours and events, flyering, and asking people from nonprofits who are still working in person to help connect you to the community.

And then there's the mental health aspect of working from home, which has often meant people have worked longer hours with little delineation between work and home life. The normal isolation that comes with a pandemic is compounded for young journalists who might be moving to entirely new places where they've been lucky enough to land a job. According to one survey of 130 journalists by John Crowley, a freelance editor and media consultant, 64% of respondents said they hadn't had any positive work experiences during lockdowns; 87% felt like their employer should bear some responsibility for their work-from-home conditions. Newsrooms should be providing material support, including subsidizing what people would normally have access to in an office, such as internet, phones, and office supplies that they need to do their work. They should also be flexible about all the obligations — like parenting or eldercare — that people might be juggling right now.

Newsroom shutdowns are only one new aspect that young reporters entering the industry during an economic recession face right now; tumultuous entries into journalism careers are becoming more common than not. The Courant itself has faced continual cuts over the years. Putterman says he was once talking to a more veteran reporter about his backup plan to journalism, should he ever get laid off. The older reporter said they had never thought about that when they were starting out. "It was jarring to me," Putterman says. "Every young reporter I know has a backup plan."

Like every workplace, newsrooms have their own issues. Institutional work cultures can be racist and sexist; many journalists of color face microaggressions both in physical and virtual workspaces. Younger reporters, who have less power in the newsroom, can often find themselves doing low-paid, entry-level work with uneven mentorship and training opportunities.

The current shift should be seen as an opportunity

for newsrooms to reinvent themselves, according to Dr. Courtney McCluney, a professor of organizational behavior at Cornell University who studies marginalization in the workplace. The move to remote work should be a time for newsrooms to be intentional about "redefin[ing] what kind of workplace they want to have." This means keeping the parts of the newsroom that worked and thinking critically about what needs to be changed.

And the flow of learning goes both ways — younger journalists, who are often in more precarious positions and come from a more diverse generation, have experiences that should inform newsrooms. In a piece on working from home while Black, McCluney and Laura Morgan Roberts write that one way managers can foster a more inclusive environment is to "relax their expectations for workers' participation" right now. This could mean asking "everyone to join meetings using mediums that are based on their personal comfort level and accessibility that day."

When it comes specifically to mentorship for younger employees, remote work environments often put the onus on individuals to reach out if they want to make connections with people outside their direct teams. "It would behoove newsrooms to create programs particularly at this time to tap into the existing veteran talent, to help continue to rear the emerging talent, formalizing and scheduling those opportunities," says Sarah Glover, former president of the National Association of Black Journalists.

For editors, managers, and veteran reporters who are also dealing with burnout, overwork, and parenting during a global pandemic, it might be easy to forget about fostering their younger colleagues in the office. But as Megan Greenwell, editor of Wired.com and co-director of the Princeton Summer Journalism Program, points out, "That first job in an industry like journalism, which so many people drop out of, is in a lot of cases just totally make or break." She notes that more senior members of the office reaching out to younger colleagues can go a long way and that finding more ways to connect, even virtually, feels "particularly important" right now.

Greenwell points to the mentorship program her company set up this summer where people were paired with others they didn't work with on a day-to-day basis. Her mentee is someone she had never met before.



**WHEN IT COMES SPECIFICALLY TO MENTORSHIP FOR YOUNG EMPLOYEES, REMOTE WORK ENVIRONMENTS OFTEN PUT THE ONUS ON INDIVIDUALS TO REACH OUT IF THEY WANT TO MAKE CONNECTIONS**

"It's so fun and I'm getting as much out of it as she is," Greenwell says.

In October, Andrea González-Ramírez founded the Latinas in Journalism Mentorship Program, which matches early-career Latina women and nonbinary Latinxs with fellow journalists who are veterans in the industry. Many of the mentees were "feeling unmoored" as they started their first jobs or freelance careers during a pandemic, often as the only Latina reporters in their newsrooms, says González-Ramírez.

The program takes place mainly over Zoom and phone calls, but is off to a good start, according to González-Ramírez, in part because one of the most important things they were looking for when screening mentors was a willingness to commit a certain amount of time to the mentoring relationship. "One mistake I do feel newsrooms do when they have mentorship programs is

that they just arbitrarily pair people up," she says. "Something I've heard from mentors and mentees is, 'I just had one call and never spoke with that mentor ever again.'" Instead, González-Ramírez argues newsrooms should be deliberate about who they pair up and why — and make sure they choose mentors invested in the project: "We want to make sure we can pair people up who can relate to each other in a more profound way than just, 'Oh, we're journalists.' For example, there are intentional categories in our directory for people who are queer or immigrants or moms."

The decimation of the news industry overall already makes it challenging for young reporters just starting their careers. The loss of physical newsrooms is a new fire to put out, amid a bigger fight for better working conditions, but most young journalists I spoke to expect to return to the office someday. Yet it still remains to be seen what will happen to the next generation of journalists when their newsrooms shut permanently and go fully remote, like the Hartford Courant.

Brindley worries that without a newsroom, more people at her office will try to find jobs elsewhere because they "feel like they don't have a home."

As for her own future? Brindley loves her work and serving the community she reports on but isn't sure how sustainable it is in the long run: "I don't feel like I have a reliable career path sketched out because I don't think it's possible to sketch out a reliable career path." ■

## NIEMAN NOTES

### 1961

**Robert C. (R.C.) Smith** died in Jamestown, North Carolina, on December 20, 2020. He was 93. Smith worked at several newspapers in Virginia and North Carolina before joining MDC, Inc., a Durham-based organization promoting economic progress in the South, where he worked on education initiatives from 1968 to 1992.

### 1966

**Robert Giles** is the recipient of the Bill Montgomery Literary Service Award, which is bestowed by the National Writers Series of Traverse City and is named after a local author who wrote a memoir about his battle with cancer. Giles, former curator of the Nieman Foundation, was honored for his long journalism career, including as managing editor of the Akron Beacon Journal and its Pulitzer-winning coverage of the 1970 Kent State shootings, which he wrote about in his book “When Truth Mattered.”

### 1987

**Ira Rosen** is the author of “Ticking Clock: Behind the Scenes at 60 Minutes,”

an insider’s account of the legendary investigative television show where Rosen is a producer and writer. It was published by St. Martin’s Press in February.

### 1988

**Dale Maharidge** has penned a new book, “F—ed at Birth: Recalibrating the American Dream for the 2020s.” Published by Unnamed Press in January, the book explores the limits of the American Dream — and the realities of being poor — in the coming decade, as the pandemic, economic crisis, and social reckoning continue to rock the country.

### 1992

**Martin Gehlen**, a respected Middle East expert and correspondent from Germany and a 1992 Nieman Fellow, died on February 6 after suffering a heart attack. He was 64. Gehlen reported for German newspapers — including Der Tagesspiegel, the Frankfurter Rundschau, and the Stuttgarter Zeitung — from across the Middle East, including in Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Iran, and Egypt. Starting in 2008, he was based in Cairo and covered the Arab Spring there.

### 1994

**Sam Fulwood III** is the new

dean of the American University School of Communication; he will join the school’s faculty in May. Fulwood was most recently a senior fellow and the vice president of race and equity at the Center of American Progress.

### 2006

**Chris Cobler** is the founding publisher and CEO of the Fort Worth Report, a new local news nonprofit covering civic issues, local government, education, and culture in the Fort Worth, Texas, area that will launch this spring. Most recently, Cobler was editor and publisher of the Victoria Advocate newspaper.

### 2008

**Olivera Perkins** has joined Lead Stories, a fact-checking website that is part of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), as a fact-checker and writer. She previously covered business and labor for Cleveland’s Plain Dealer.

### 2015

**Melody Joy Kramer** is the new director of communications and business development at the Carolina Population Center, a population research center based at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill.

**Kramer**, formerly of NPR, also leads communications for the affiliated Carolina Demography.

### 2018

**María Ramírez** has been promoted to deputy managing editor of Spain’s elDiario.es in December. She was previously the online newspaper’s director of strategy.

**Bonny Symons-Brown** has joined Vice News as a director and producer. She previously worked as a producer and reporter for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation as well as being a freelance reporter based in Mexico.

### 2019

**Juan Arredondo** is the Buffett Foundation Visiting Professor of Visual Journalism at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University. Arredondo is a photojournalist and filmmaker with a focus on human rights issues and social inequality.

### 2020

**Nour Malas** has joined the Los Angeles Times as a deputy editor for the business section, leading a team focused on income inequality. Previously, Malas was a Wall Street Journal news editor based in L.A.

## Bryan Monroe, NF '03, remembered as “a giant of our industry, larger than life in so many good ways”

The former NABJ president is remembered by Niemans who knew him during his fellowship year and after

**B**ryan Monroe, a 2003 Nieman Fellow with an impressive resume that included leadership roles at the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ), Ebony and Jet magazines, CNNPolitics.com, and Knight Ridder Newspapers, died after suffering a heart attack at his home in Bethesda, Maryland, on January 13. He was 55.

“I’m having a hard time thinking of Bryan Monroe in the past tense since he’s been a steady presence in my life since he came to Cambridge as a Nieman Fellow,” writes Callie Crossley, NF ’83, of Monroe. “He always teased me that I was the reason he was a fellow, partly true since I was on his selection committee. But he wowed all the judges, as he wowed most of the people who got to work with him.”

Monroe, who led NABJ from 2005 to 2007, was the Verizon chair and a professor at Temple University’s Klein College of Media and Communication. While he was

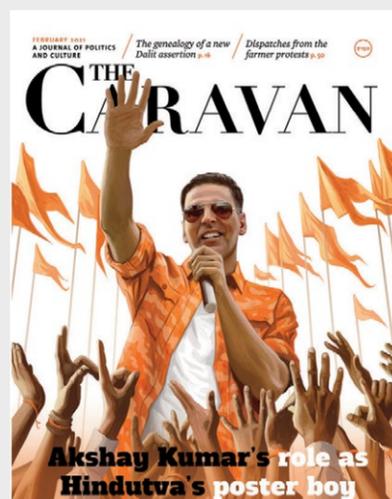


assistant vice president of news at Knight Ridder Newspapers from 2002 to 2006, he helped lead journalists at the (Biloxi, Mississippi) Sun Herald to the 2006 Pulitzer Prize in Public Service for their coverage of Hurricane Katrina. He went on to lead coverage of the 2008 presidential election as vice president and editorial director of Ebony and Jet magazines, and he conducted the first post-election interview with President Barack Obama.

Ernie Suggs, NF ’09, who was elected vice president of the NABJ following Monroe’s tenure, writes, “I knew that I had big shoes to fill.” It was Monroe that

Suggs turned to for help when applying for a Nieman Fellowship. “It was Bryan who read and ripped apart my essays until they were perfect. And he was the first person I called when I was accepted and could call him not only an NABJ brother, but a Nieman brother as well.”

Monroe’s classmate Ann M. Simons remembers Monroe as “a giant of our industry, larger than life in so many good ways. He was kind, generous, and passionate about giving back,” she writes. “He was a supporter and mentor ... But most of all, he was a friend and he will truly be missed.” ■



## India’s Caravan magazine is the winner of the 2021 Lyons Award

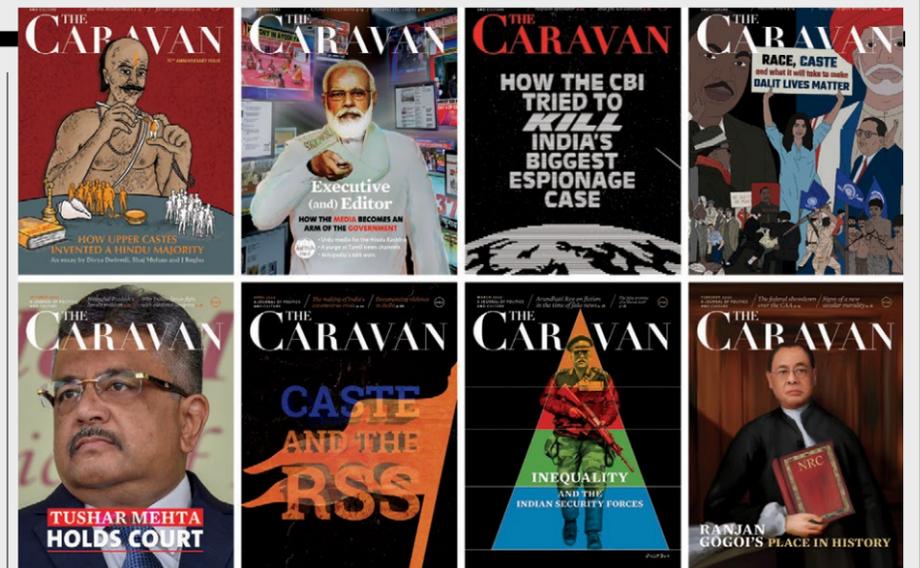
**T**he Caravan, a journal of politics and culture in India, is the winner of the 2021 Louis M. Lyons Award for Conscience and Integrity in Journalism. Nieman Fellows in the class of 2021 selected The Caravan, India’s first publication devoted to narrative journalism, in recognition of “its uncompromising coverage of the erosion of human rights, social justice, and democracy in India.”

In making their selection, which

was announced in February, fellows highlighted The Caravan’s fearless, uncompromising reporting on the ongoing nationwide farmers’ protests — coverage that has drawn the ire of Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s government, which has brought sedition charges against several Caravan journalists and attempted to shut down the publication’s social media accounts. The Caravan has produced a number of high-profile investigations, including ones on

Hindu supremacist terrorism, caste and gender injustice, political murder, and ethnic violence against India’s Muslim minority.

The Louis M. Lyons Award was established by the Nieman class of 1964 in honor of the Nieman Foundation curator of the same name who led the Foundation for 25 years before retiring that year. The award recognizes displays of conscience and integrity by individuals, groups, or institutions in communications. Past recipients have included Edward R. Murrow, Joe Alex Morris Jr., Marcela Turati, Elena Milashina, and many others. ■



## War Coverage Isn't Over When the Shooting Stops

The story of war is also the story of young women widowed, of lost childhoods — and people's extraordinary bravery and creativity in the face of devastation

BY ALISSA J. RUBIN



I never set out to cover wars. What I wanted was to report overseas, understand foreign lands, explore how the world worked. But my timing was off — or perhaps it was just right.

It was the summer of 2001 when the news organization I worked for had an opening in its Balkans bureau; two months later, on September 11, Al Qaeda attacked the United States, and my life changed.

As I watched from Serbia the clips of smoke rising in plumes from Manhattan, I called the Los Angeles Times foreign desk and offered to go anywhere: Afghanistan, Pakistan, Tajikistan. Eight weeks later I got a call: Could I get a visa to Pakistan?

From Pakistan I went into Afghanistan and began, in 2001, to cover war close up. In many ways, I haven't stopped, although there have been intermissions.

What I learned was that war coverage was about much more than territory won or lost or the moment of death. The story was broader and deeper, and it was never over when the shooting stopped. I asked myself if we shouldn't try to redefine what it means to cover war. War is also the story of civilians, of young women widowed, of lost childhoods. It almost always damages the arts, smashes monuments, and attempts to erase history or rewrite it. It changes a society's sense of time. People learn to live for the moment because there may not be a tomorrow.

One of my first deeply challenging stories was in July 2002. A wedding in a remote area of Afghanistan had been bombed by the Americans. The goal was to kill Taliban that the U.S. military said had joined the festivities.

It turned out that the bombing had killed the groom and 47 others, most of them

women and children. There were still bits of flesh in the trees.

Were there Taliban there? Yes, almost certainly. How many? Hard to say — only a few out of those killed. Did it make a difference that they were dead? The Americans said so, but it wasn't clear. What had been the cost? For those who lost their families, the scars would not heal. The cost to the Americans was hatred for their cavalier disposal of lives. At the time, one of the local elders said to me, "Is this your democracy?"

I covered most intensively wars and conflicts where the United States has been an agent of violence, either directly or indirectly, because I believe citizens need to know what their government is doing and the true price of victory.



**I asked myself if we shouldn't try to redefine what it means to cover war**

I began writing about women, especially disfavored ones: divorced members of the Iraqi Parliament, women suicide bombers. I wrote about the rise of sectarianism. In Afghanistan I did extensive reporting on battered and murdered women. I was in Iraq as the Islamic State took over the north. The extremists targeted Shia Muslims and Yazidis for especially brutal treatment. They killed about 5,000 Yazidis, mostly men, and forced thousands of young women into slavery. Most Yazidis fled, many on foot, and about 30,000 got stuck on Mount Sinjar.

On August 12, 2014, I went up in an Iraqi military helicopter to try to understand what was happening to the Yazidis. The pilot, eager to help those who were stranded on the mountaintop, allowed too many people to get on. There were no seats, everyone was piled up on top of each other and, after a shaky take off, the helicopter tipped and crashed.

The pilot was killed, many were wounded, and I was flung against the metal back of the pilot's seat and lost consciousness. My wrists were crushed, my nose badly broken, and I had three broken ribs and a collapsed lung. Worst of all, I had a concussion and bleeding on the surface of my brain. I was slipping in and out of consciousness.

Ultimately, I was medevaced out of Iraq, in large part because of the efforts of my New York Times colleague Rod Nordland, who was reporting in the same area. It took seven painful months to make an initial recovery, then another year to be close to full recovery.

In 2017, I started a journey that has not ended to try to find out who the people were who had rushed on to that helicopter. Their story is so much harder than mine. They lacked good medical care; many were left jobless because of the war; most are living still in refugee camps or are crowded with relatives far from home.

Now I am trying to write their story. Wars may peter out eventually, but people's lives are changed forever. The loss leaves irremediable scars; civilization is battered. I owe so much to so many people I can never thank, so one reason I still do what I do is that I have a debt beyond measure. The only thing I can do is keep reporting and writing about people's lives, their extraordinary bravery, their creativity in the face of complete devastation and, above all, their longing for a little decency. ■

*Alissa J. Rubin, the Baghdad bureau chief for The New York Times, is a 2021 Nieman Fellow*



### AFTERIMAGE

"I visited the emergency department of a Stepanakert hospital several times during the last days of the war in Nagorno Karabakh. I spent hours waiting by the entrance, making pictures of men as they were brought from the frontline in neighboring Shushi (called Shusha by Azerbaijanis) by ambulance. It was here that I understood, despite the contradictory official government communications, that Shushi was about to fall."

**Anastasia Taylor-Lind**, photojournalist and 2016 Nieman Fellow, on photographing the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict in November 2020

### NIEMAN ONLINE

#### NiemanReports

##### The Extremist Mob at the U.S. Capitol was America, Too

Many Americans, including journalists, expressed shock after witnessing Trump supporters storm the U.S. Capitol on January 6. However, Issac J. Bailey notes that the events that unfolded that day were no surprise to those who have been paying attention to the country's history of white nationalism — an ugly truth that journalists must do a better job conveying.

#### NiemanLab

##### Predictions for Journalism 2021

What's ahead for the journalism industry in 2021? Every year, Nieman Lab asks some of the smartest people in journalism and media what they think is coming this year — both good and bad. Read predictions on topics ranging from subscriptions and paywalls to newsroom diversity initiatives, the rise of "radical newsroom transparency," and much more.

#### NiemanStoryboard

##### Journalists on the Screen: A Conflicted Image

Many Americans don't have good impressions of journalism. Could that have something to do with pop culture portrayals of reporters? 2016 Nieman Fellow Christopher Borrelli, a features writer and arts critic for the Chicago Tribune, explores this idea in his essay about how the depiction of journalists in movies and TV shapes public perceptions of the press.

**Nieman**Reports

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