Contributors

Soﬁa Cerda Campero is a Mexican-American journalist and translator. Her work mostly focuses on the intersections of gender, race, culture, and the Latinx diaspora. She’s also co-host and producer of “Remotaz,” a Spanish-language podcast about Mexican womanhood.

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

Celeste Kate Marston has spent 25 years reporting for newspapers, magazines, and radio with a specialty in politics, elections, and voting rights, and has been on staff at outlets including the New York Daily News, Newsweek, and WNYC New York.

John Archibald, a 2021 Nieman Fellow, is a Pulitzer Prize winner and columnist for the Alabama Media Group.

Jacqui Banaszynski is editor at Nieman Storyboard and a faculty fellow at the Poynter Institute. She won the 1988 Pulitzer Prize in feature writing for “AIDS in the Heartland,” a series about a gay farm couple facing AIDS, and was a finalist for the 1986 Pulitzer in international reporting for her account of the sub-Saharan famine.

Deb Pastner is director of photo and video at the Star Tribune.

Mattia Ferraresi, a 2021 Nieman Fellow, is the managing editor for Italy’s Domani newspaper.

Lisa Lerner is a national political correspondent for the New York Times and 2018 Nieman Fellow.

Austen Bogues, a 2021 Nieman Fellow at Harvard University, most recently covered Ashby Park and Neptune Township as well as race relations for the Ashby Park Press, part of the USA Today Network in New Jersey.

Kyle Edwards, a 2021 Nieman Visiting Fellow, is managing editor at Native News Online.

Brett Anderson, a 2013 Nieman Fellow, is a food writer for The New York Times.

Maureen O’Donnell became the Chicago Sun-Times’ obituary writer in 2009. Before joining the Sun-Times, she was a criminal courts reporter for the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, an associate editor at Adweek magazine, and a reporter and editor at the City News Bureau of Chicago.

Shira Springer has been a sports journalist for more than 20 years. While at The Boston Globe, she served as the Boston Celtics beat writer. She currently writes columns on women in sports for the Sports Business Journal and teaches journalism full time at Boston University.

Kathleen McNerny is a freelance journalist in Boston. She led local education coverage for Boston’s NPR News Station, WBUR, and spent over a decade working as an audio producer and reporter in the Boston area.

Laura Colarusso is Nieman Reports’ senior editor. Previously, she was the digital managing editor at GBH News and a member of The Boston Globe’s editorial board.

Issac Bailey, a 2014 Nieman Fellow, is the author of “Why Didn’t We Night A Black Man in Trumpland?” (Other Press, October 2020) and “My Brother Mookie: Regaining Dignity in the Face of Crime, Poverty, and Racism in the American South” (Other Press, 2018). He has contributed to Politico, CNN.com, Time, and The Washington Post.

Elizaveta Kuznetsova is a fellow at Dori Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard University. She holds a PhD in international relations from University of London. She specializes in public diplomacy, propaganda, and Russian foreign policy.

Ann Cooper was a 2020 Joan Shorenstein Fellow at Harvard Kennedy School’s Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy. She served as executive director of the Committee to Protect Journalists from 1998 until June 2006.

Chelsea Cirrizzo is a health reporter for U.S. News & World Report. She’s been published in a number of outlets, including The Washington Post, The Lily, DCist, Washington City Paper, Wired, and others.

Clio Chang is an assistant editor at Nieman Storyboard. She specializes in public diplomacy, propaganda, and Russian foreign policy.

Macieck Nabradalik is a 2018 Nieman Fellow. He is a freelance writer and radio producer in Poland. His work has been published in OnRound, Dziennik Ziemi Lubelskiej, and state-financed public broadcaster creates an alternative to state media.

Elizaveta Kuznetsova of Russia is a national fellow at Dori Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard University. She holds a PhD in international relations from University of London. She specializes in public diplomacy, propaganda, and Russian foreign policy.

Ann Cooper was a 2020 Joan Shorenstein Fellow at Harvard Kennedy School’s Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy. She served as executive director of the Committee to Protect Journalists from 1998 until June 2006.

Chelsea Cirrizzo is a health reporter for U.S. News & World Report. She’s been published in a number of outlets, including The Washington Post, The Lily, DCist, Washington City Paper, Wired, and others.
For Maria Hinojosa, changing the narrative about Latinx people requires deconstructing those already created by journalists.

In order to break the way that we’re talking about this particular crisis, you have to really deconstruct. We see how long it’s taking in terms of the Black Lives Matter movement and pushing for this kind of conversation in newsrooms.

Now we have to take it and just be like, “OK, now you got to deconstruct everything you think and know about immigrants.” Can we, as journalists, accept and apologize for using the term “boat people”?

That would be like our colleagues right now, from CNN, or from The New York Times, to go down and look at the people, the refugees, sleeping on the sidewalks in Matamoros [in Tamaulipas, Mexico], and say they are “concrete people.”

That’s why we have to have these conversations amongst journalists, so that we can lovingly say to them, “Bro, sis, you got to deconstruct this to understand.”

On the narrative of Latinx people in the U.S., becoming more positive

Absolutely it’s going to change. I’m so sure of it. What happened in 2020, in terms of the participation of Latino and Latina voters was like, even though it was not front and center of the news, we’re watching it.

Let me tell you, it could have gone south. Latino/Latina voters could have said, “Finger it out.” They didn’t. The more complex part about it was how many voted for Trump. The Latino/Latina Trump reality is real. On the other hand, who’s one of the most exciting politicians that you actually want to see what she’s doing? [Rep.] Alexandria Ocasio Cortez. She’s going to run for president. We know it. That energy that is going to bring a generation of young Latinos ... What we fail to understand and what our colleagues fail to understand is that Latinos and Latinas are going to drive population growth along with Asian-Americans. CNN did just name its new anchors. Three Latino up and coming journalists are creating space. That is what the future looks like.

I think that is why Latino USA, changing the narrative about Latinx people requires deconstructing those already created by journalists.

For example, in some ways, the “Suave” podcast is a piece that a very Latinocentric. In some ways, the “Suave” story is hyperlocal, related to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania prisons, juvenile lifers. On the other hand, it’s just like a really deep human story.

My colleague, Julio Ricardo Varela, is a contributor on NBC Latino. I think it’s a platform that is really important.

NBC Black, NBC Asian, I actually think those are really important platforms. They should exist. The point is that the home page is not understanding the complexity ... they’re not practicing their best journalism.

It’s why it’s, in some ways, easier to be independent, because the riskier moves that you take, the back falls on you. Whereas when you’re in corporate media, the back falls on a lot of people, and so people may not take the risks that they need to take. That may mean simply from this very structural racist perspective, which is, “Well, do I put these on the front page or not? Is it going to do well?” I’m like, what is your responsibility as a journalist?

On the origins of Futuro Media, and recognizing the need for a different news lens

One of the most important moments for me was when I got the U.S. Census data from 2000 that showed that the Latino population in the U.S. — not including...
I’d never thought about writing for teenagers. The subject matter of my work doesn’t exactly lend itself to a young audience — or so I assumed. In my two decades of covering the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia, I’ve focused on conflicts, human rights abuses, political upheaval, women’s rights (or the lack of), and other difficult issues. And so, when an editor or Scholaristic asked me if I’d consider adapting my first book, “No Turning Back: Life, Loss, and Hope in Wartime Syria,” for a young adult audience, I reacted with horror. The Syrian conflict is devastating and complicated. It is often difficult for adults to understand, let alone young people. Now a decade old, the war has claimed at least 300,000 lives and displaced half of the country’s almost 13 million. The figures are numbing, but every statistic is a story of a person, every person a member of a family, every family an integral part of a community, every community part of a country.

I wanted to focus on those factors, but how do I do it for a young audience? I thought back to the time when I was in school and some of the books I’d read and been assigned. Those which stuck with me into adulthood showed me the horrors of war through the lived experiences of children. And I remembered that there is a way to tell difficult stories to young people without talking down to or traumatizing them.

“The Sisters of the War: Two Remarkable True Stories of Survival and Hope in Syria,” was published in September 2020. It tells the stories of two sets of sisters who find themselves on opposite sides of the war. The sisters appear in “No Turning Back,” but their stories are afforded more space, depth, and background in the adaptation. Some of the language is simplified and terms such as Al-Qaeda, socialism, and 9/11 are explained rather than assumed knowledge. An epilogue also updates readers on where the girls are now.

I knew from the outset that I wanted the protagonists to be about the same age as the readers because I didn’t want young people to feel lectured to by an adult. It’s not often enough we see war through the eyes of children, but it’s a critical perspective.

The story is dark in places but teenage readers will also hopefully come away from the story uplifted and inspired. It’s a story set in Syria, but it also transcends borders. At a time of great division, when differences are magnified and feared, and refugees and foreigners are demonized by some, the stories of these girls will hopefully remind readers that young people everywhere are not so very different.

The last year has shaken my faith in journalism through the struggles of the past year. I’ve been reminded of the darkness. It’s a credo many of us in this field hold close to our hearts. It’s a credo that I work to shed light on the darkness. It’s a credo that we must go hand in hand with.

I covered court cases regularly. I never worked on a story because I thought it might be controversial or unappealing or too negative. I would have no trouble with that today, but I realized that I had finished my time as a journalist with more questions than answers.

In the midst of moving back to New York, I took on projects that looked at race and policing — from our correspondents talking about living as Black men in America to a look at how often Black Americans are stopped by police and the dangers they encounter.

In the fall, I became a senior producer in the race and culture unit at ABC News’ “World News Tonight with David Muir.” I’d long been hesitant about moving into this leadership role in the newsroom, but I finally felt ready. I wanted to make an impact on diversity and representation.

What I’ve learned over the past seven months is that covering race in day and day out in America means wrestling with despair. But finding hope when you are covering the worst of actions by your fellow men has proven difficult. Since the start of the pandemic and the death of George Floyd, our nation has seen a rise in hate crimes against Asians and American-Asians, the storming of the U.S. Capitol by insurrectionists, and the continuation of fatal police encounters for black and brown people.

I cannot help but wonder if through highlighting the issues, we are making matters worse. Are we emboldening bad actors to carry out their hatred? They say the darkest hour is just before dawn, but how can we be certain that daylight is near? I have to believe that news coverage leads to change. I am holding on to hope in the midst of despair.
MAKING LATINX COMMUNITIES VISIBLE IN LOCAL NEWS

From more established outlets to startups, these newsrooms are bringing nuanced, in-depth coverage to the issues impacting Latinx people

By Sofia Cerda Campero

AN STAR PLAYER MARCO FABIÁN revive the Union’s Latino fan base? Show me some cariño (affection), they say.”

That was the headline for an April 2019 Spanish-language multimedia feature in The Philadelphia Inquirer about Mexican soccer player Marco Fabián, star of the Philadelphia Union team, which over the previous nine years had dropped most of its Hispanic players.

In the piece, Inquirer staffer Jesenia De Moya Correa unpacks, through interviews with several Spanish-speaking sources of different ages and nationalities, what having a Mexican player on the Philadelphia squad means to the city’s Latinx communities. It wasn’t the first time the Inquirer had covered Fabián or the local league. However, it was the first time that the story was told through voices from the community.
“To have a reporter there among them, chatting and debating about the future of the league, was really moving for them,” De Moya Correa says of her interviews.

For Latinx news consumers, that’s been an all too rare experience — and one that a growing number of independent outlets are determined to change.

There are over 60 million Latinx in the United States, comprising 18.2% of the population. (Latinx is a panethnic label that embraces the fluidity of these communities, which is why the term is used in this piece.) While many Latinx share a language, religion, and many aspects of culture, the group is not monolithic. Yet news outlets have often been blind to this diversity, most notably during last November’s presidential election when many anchors, analysts, and commentators were shocked to learn that large percentages of Latinx in Texas and Florida had supported Donald Trump.

“DE MÓYA CORREA, who was born in New York to Dominican immigrants. Reporting in the field, potential sources would ask her, “Who are you working for?” When she replied she was with The Philadelphia Inquirer, people ignored her or even asked her to leave their streets. “You only come here to report on crime or scandal,” De Moya Correa says a black organizer once told her.

De Moya Correa has persisted, through sending emails and WhatsApp messages to community leaders, people from religious institutions, council members, activists, and teachers who could guide her to the topics the Inquirer needed to cover. That effort is starting to pay off, with El Inquirer slowly getting the support of members of the Latinx communities.

“The newspaper is finally giving validation to these experiences of relevance to Latinx readers.”

Preserving a universe of relevance to Latinx readers.

EL INQUIRER

A
t the Inquirer, De Moya Correa had been hired to develop a content strategy to reach the city’s large Spanish-speaking population. Her piece on Marco Fabián was the first of her work to be published in Spanish, and it was a catalyst for the founding of El Inquirer, a repository for Spanish-language coverage and translations of Inquirer stories of relevance to Latinx readers.

Historically, the Inquirer’s relationship with the city’s Latinx communities has been rocky. With a newsroom that is 75% white, the Inquirer dedicated only 3.4% of its coverage to Latinx communities, the fastest-growing demographic in the United States after Asian-Americans. In Philadelphia, the Latinx population nearly doubled over the past four years — from Hurricane Maria to the El Paso shooting to the Covid-19 pandemic — are impacting Latinx communities.

THE INQUIRER

The problem, however, was that there was no relationship with the Inquirer needed to cover. “More than a creative challenge, it’s a chance to offer coverage specific to El Inquirer’s job was to improve the Inquirer’s coverage of and relationship with Latinx communities.

In this Is What Latinx Media Could Actually Look Like,” Puerto Rican founder Frances Solá-Santiago tackles the “VogueChallenge,” a social media initiative that invited users to post their own versions of a Vogue cover. “More than a creative challenge, it’s a chance to highlight Black, Indigenous, Asian, Latinx, and other races and ethnicities around the world who’ve been historically overlooked by fashion and beauty magazines,” she wrote.

The piece speaks to the reckoning over diversity in fashion while emphasizing that media employees from racialized communities have often been overlooked and mistrusted, as evidenced by the spate of resignations during the summer of 2020 of top editors from outlets like Bon Appetit, Refinery29, and The Philadelphia Inquirer over racist behaviors and discrimination against employees of color. The lack of diversity “has affected coverage of Latinx communities and media,” says Solá-Santiago. “This affects marginalized groups and re-inforces Eurocentric beauty standards. At Emperifollá, our premise is that fashion and beauty are inherently political. It’s our responsibility to look into the nuances
of the communities we aim to represent and serve.”

To be emperifollá or emperifollada means to be well dressed and groomed, to look decorated. The term is popularly used across Latin America but resonates deeply in Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic. Solá-Santiago got the idea for the site after reading “The Joy of Always Being Emperifollá,” a 2018 personal essay by Laila García-Portado that explores the author’s relationship with fashion and the women who raised her. Solá-Santiago was reminded of her grandmother, mother, and aunts putting on their powder and lipstick, always looking emperifollá as a way of highlighting their presence and power. She started a Twitter thread to explain what had to say about emperifollá.

“The biggest challenge is to make it as one of the 10 Latina-owned businesses to support. In September 2019, O, The Oprah Magazine featured viewers consuming Emperifollá’s content every month. Residents perceive this straight away and see themselves reflected in the pictures and the story they told.”

Founder and Oakland native Madeleine Bair noticed a crucial aspect that was missing in the city’s local media when she returned to her hometown in 2017: Latinx voices. “This year has been particularly focused on Covid because our audience has been the most impacted by it,” she says. “The most relevant information, such as renter protection or where to get tested, isn’t always available in Spanish on the channels and tools that they use.”

For instance, El Tímpano sent out a message asking how Covid-19 has affected people’s personal finances. Among the many responses was one from a man who had lost his job due to the pandemic and didn’t qualify for government aid. He asked how he could access financial help to pay his rent, and El Tímpano answered his question, providing him with the resources he needed. El Tímpano is responsive to user feedback, too. When a woman mentioned that El Tímpano always referred people to numbers that often don’t pick up, the outlet started providing other resources that were more easily accessible.

Bair, who is fluent in Spanish, grounded her startup in extensive research. She reached out to community leaders — church pastors, educators, advocates, people who worked with Oakland’s Latinx immigrant communities — and held workshops as well as surveying some 500 residents. “Latinos are the largest growing group in the city, and yet if you didn’t live or work in Oakland, you had no way of knowing this because the voices and narratives of Latino immigrants are nearly invisible in local media,” says Bair. People of Latinx or Hispanic origin make up 26.5% of Oakland’s population. Spanish is the most common non-English language, spoken by 21.8% of the population.

Bair found that most people were either getting their news from Univisión and Telemundo, the major Spanish-language media outlets, or local radio stations that covered the entire Bay Area. She also found that many residents were getting information from grassroots organizations, provided during meetings, while many others avoided the news altogether. Bair says many felt the news only painted them as victims or alleged criminals, a topic that came from audience questions.

“It’s important to note that as El Tímpano has developed a relationship of trust and reciprocity with our SMS community, community members are increasingly sending questions to us that are not directly in response to the messages we send out,” says Bair, a woman married to someone who serves on the editorial board.

El Tímpano has received funding through grants, including The Lenfest Institute and The California Wellness Foundation. Revenues also include government funding to provide census information and public health information. In November, El Tímpano reached 1,200 people.

L.A. TACO

At February, Javier Cabral, a Los Angeles native, a Mexican American born to immigrant parents, and editor since 2019 of the James Beard award-winning platform L.A. Taco, published a story about Andrés Santos, an elote, a person who prepares corn at a food stand. Santos had worked in Highland Park for 23 years but, in response to the effects of gentrification, decided to go back to his native Mexico. The story, threading in entire sentences in Spanish and highlighting the popular expression ya estuvo (“I’ve had it”) is an example of how food can be used as a vehicle to bring visibility to the narratives of Mexican-Americans in Los Angeles.

“He is humbled, exhausted, and fastaged after getting up at 5 AM and single-handedly shucking and slicing the kernels off 500 ears of corn. He prepped up until 3 PM for his very last day of service,” wrote Cabral, describing the intense labor, long hours, and hazards experienced by many immigrants in the informal workforce.

COURTESY OF EL TÍMPANO

CRISTINA DEL MAR QUILES, TODAS

“Spicy Latinx.” My generation is more about self-expression and gender fluidity. We understand that a Latina is not necessarily a curvy heterosexual woman.”

“At Abuela’s House” features drag queen Vena Cava, the stage name for Puerto Rican creative Anthony Velázquez, and Alto-Latina model Anastasia Lovers. Wearing abuela-like clothing by Latinx designers: polka dots, golden earrings and rings, saint medallions, and shiny tunics. The goal: to juxtapose old-school behavior with a new inclusive moment. “It was a reflection of our own experiences, remembering the afternoons we spent at our grandmother’s house,” says Solá-Santiago.

P Politics — church pastors, educators, advocates, people who worked with Oakland’s Latinx immigrants: women who raised us.

“The most relevant information, such as renter protection or where to get tested, isn’t always available in Spanish on the channels and tools that they use.”
There are close to 10,000 food vendors in Los Angeles, many of whom are undocumented and identify as Latinx. Over the past eight years, the average cost of a house in Highland Park has more than doubled, from $387,500 to $797,250. Once a predominantly Latinx neighborhood, Highland Park has seen gentrification impact residents as well as the workers who cater to specific communities. In this case, the non-Latinx newcomers to the neighborhood did not share the same interest in Santos’ corn, eventually forcing him to give up his business.

“I was born and raised here,” says Cahal. “I’ve seen firsthand how my city is changing. I think the biggest topic is development, gentrification, and homelessness. So, we find ways of telling these stories in a unique way.” Almost half of the population in Los Angeles is Latinx or of Latinx origin.

Among other topics, L.A. Taco shines a light on the inequality and economic disparities that the Latinx Los Angeles workforce faces. The outlet has also focused on addressing activism and racial injustice, working alongside Black voices and promoting unity among communities. In November, the site published “To Sheriff Villanueva,” which explores the #AdiosVillanueva campaign addressing the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department’s response to the killing of Andres Guardado, an 18-year-old Salvadoran who was shot by a security guard while working as a security guard. Since 2000, 53% of police fatalities were identified by the Los Angeles County Medical Examiner-Coroner as “Latino.” Other issues covered by Todas include increasing rates of femicides and domestic violence. A piece by contributor Adriana Díaz Tirado explains how La Red de Albergues de Violencia Doméstica en Puerto Rico, shelters for women who have faced domestic abuse, are saving lives during lockdown. This service-journalism piece spotlights the gender violence that has been happening during the coronavirus pandemic. It provides a list of contacts and shelters to which women are at risk can turn.

“With the politicization of their deaths often follows the dearth of narratives about thephemeral, these pieces gather letters from activists from Black and Latinx communities who share their experiences of trauma at the hands of law enforcement on behalf of their sons. The letters speak to the systematic racism, impunity, lack of accountability and grief families are subjected to every day.

“Politician[s] of their families, this piece gathers letters from activists from Black and Latinx communities who share their experiences of trauma at the hands of law enforcement on behalf of their sons. The letters speak to the systematic racism, impunity, lack of accountability and grief families are subjected to every day.”

“With the politicization of their deaths often follows the dearth of narratives about the ephemeral, these pieces gather letters from activists from Black and Latinx communities who share their experiences of trauma at the hands of law enforcement on behalf of their sons. The letters speak to the systematic racism, impunity, lack of accountability and grief families are subjected to every day."

“Politician[s] of their families, this piece gathers letters from activists from Black and Latinx communities who share their experiences of trauma at the hands of law enforcement on behalf of their sons. The letters speak to the systematic racism, impunity, lack of accountability and grief families are subjected to every day.”

For the past couple of years, the independent platform has survived on donations from readers, who in exchange receive discounts and perks at restaurants that partner with L.A. Taco. However, the platform’s financial situation is far from what is needed to produce content or maintain staff. As Cahal puts it, L.A. Taco doesn’t make money, it “grinds by.” Todas was founded in the midst of a crisis. In 2017, Hurricane María devastated Puerto Rico, leaving over 10,000 residents jobless, including investigative journalist Cristina del Mar Quiles. For some time, Quiles had been thinking about starting a feminist outlet to fill a gap in the Puerto Rican media landscape. In December of 2017, only three months after Hurricane María, Quiles and a handful of collaborators launched Todas.

The project, a labor of love from a team who all have side jobs, brings the voices of women and nonbinary folks and the issues that affect them to the Puerto Rican social and political landscape, focusing on stories of individual and collective fights in culture, politics, environmental issues, and sexuality. “Anything can be looked at through a gender-equality lens,” says Quiles. “For example, pension cuts are traditionally understood as something that mostly affects men, but this is untrue. Women are carrying all of this on their shoulders.”

In July 2020, Todas published a piece that explains how pension cuts have affected women who support their families. Written by collaborator Némesis Mora Pérez, the story unpacks how female heads of families, who also have to tend to their children and grandchildren, are suffering the cuts by threading personal narratives with an up-close look at the short- and long-term effects of pension legislation. Other issues covered by Todas include increasing rates of femicides and domestic violence. A piece by contributor Adriana Díaz Tirado explains how La Red de Albergues de Violencia Doméstica en Puerto Rico, shelters for women who have faced domestic abuse, are saving lives during lockdown. This service-journalism piece spotlights the gender violence that has been happening during the coronavirus pandemic. It provides a list of contacts and shelters to which women who are at risk can turn.

“The platform continues to grow but is still in search of a revenue model. “The biggest challenge is to make independent media something sustainable,” says Quiles."

“Politician[s] of their families, this piece gathers letters from activists from Black and Latinx communities who share their experiences of trauma at the hands of law enforcement on behalf of their sons. The letters speak to the systematic racism, impunity, lack of accountability and grief families are subjected to every day."

“With the politicization of their deaths often follows the dearth of narratives about the ephemeral, these pieces gather letters from activists from Black and Latinx communities who share their experiences of trauma at the hands of law enforcement on behalf of their sons. The letters speak to the systematic racism, impunity, lack of accountability and grief families are subjected to every day."
OF THE COMMUNITY, BY THE COMMUNITY, FOR THE COMMUNITY

How the pandemic and BLM protests starkly illustrated the need for community and immigrant-serving media outlets

By Clio Chang
N March, when a man shot and killed eight people, including six women of Asian descent, across three different spas in Atlanta, Georgia, one thing quickly became clear: the mainstream press wasn’t equipped to cover the news in the way that the local Korean press was.

Atlanta K, a small local Korean-language outlet run by Sang Yeon Lee, broke the news overnight that at least two of those killed were ethnic Koreans. Eventually, it was revealed that four of the women — Hyeon-Jung Grant, Yong-Ae Yue, Sun-Cha Kim, and Soon-Chung Park — were spa workers of Korean descent. Much of the fuller reporting about the victims, including statements from their friends and families, originated from outlets like Lee’s, which were closely connected to and well sourced within the affected communities.

“Some readers told me that they didn’t trust the mainstream media, and some were disappointed by the way they were reporting,” Lee says, pointing to other outlets’ preoccupation with the spa industry, rather than focusing on the lives of the women themselves. But still, Lee says he helped national news reporters with the information he had and especially appreciated outlets that employed Korean-American journalists who reached out for his opinion to better understand the context of the tragedy.

While the coverage in Atlanta starkly illustrated the need for community and immigrant-serving media outlets like Atlanta K, this sector — which includes a huge range, from companies like Telemundo to smaller outlets serving specific local communities — has long been vital. These outlets often report in languages other than English and serve local communities of color in ways that mainstream outlets are unable to. This has become especially clear during the pandemic, which has seen not only a global health crisis that disproportionately affects minority and immigrant communities, but also massive anti-police brutality protests, growing instances of anti-Asian violence, and undocumented workers who are left out of Covid relief efforts.

The term most often used for this sector is “ethnic media,” but this framework can also unintentionally other or stigmatize publications that are as central as more mainstream, white-led outlets. CUNY’s Center for Community Media, for example, has dropped the term “ethnic” from its title. In this piece, the outlets referred to serve communities of color and immigrant communities.

Often thought of as alternative to mainstream news — despite the fact that millions of people depend on these outlets — publications serving minority and immigrant communities have spent the past year getting vital information out about Covid testing, vaccine distribution, and relief money to people on the ground.

“We have Filipino publications really focusing on how Filipino health care workers were disproportionately affected by pandemic; Vietnamese outlets were able to write stories about how the nail salons are reacting to policy changes in the reopening,” says Chi Zhang, a researcher who authored a recent survey of outlets in California for University of California, Riverside. “And last year, during the George Floyd protests, a lot of these publications were able to utilize the connections they had with local individuals and businesses and community leaders to really produce stories that are just not covered by mainstream media.”

Given the lasting impact of the coronavirus pandemic and the continuing struggles for racial justice, not to mention America’s changing demographics, publications serving minority and immigrant communities are likely to become even more integral to growing populations that rely on such publications to combat misinformation and report stories that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Lee, who has been working as a reporter at Korean-language news outlets in the United States for the past two decades, branched out on his own in 2019 to start Atlanta K, a digital-only outlet. While there were many printed Korean news sources, he felt that there wasn’t enough online-focused news for the local Korean community. Soon after Lee started the publication, the pandemic hit. Since then, Atlanta K has covered essential issues, such as providing information on local vaccine distribution and debunking Covid-19 conspiracies and misinformation.

Lee notes how Atlanta K reports with more context for its audience than other outlets, like the fact that pro-Trump conspiracies are popular among the Korean community. “Mainstream media doesn’t understand that,” Lee says. “They think the Asian community is all pro-Democrat, that they are all friendly to things like vaccines and face masks. But it’s not true because there are pro-Republican, pro-Trump people living here. I understand those kinds of things, so I can help fight against it.”

While the outlet lost ad revenue during the start of the pandemic last year, Lee says it has been easier for a digital publication like Atlanta K to financially weather the pandemic than print outlets. Lee says that Atlanta K is actually growing from local advertising and that he’s looking to hire a second-generation Korean journalist to write for the site in English.

The same can’t be said for the sector overall, which, like the media industry as a whole, has been hit hard over the past year. Zhang surveyed community media outlets in California from April to May 2020, finding that the pandemic wiped out half of the sector’s revenue in the state, with a quarter of outlets reporting a revenue loss of more than 70 percent. While audiences grew during the pandemic for nearly half of the surveyed outlets — reflecting their importance for readers — this didn’t necessarily translate into advertising revenue, which is how the majority of these outlets make money.

And yet it’s those same communities that have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. “Communities that have been hardest hit by the pandemic are probably not the communities reading the mainstream outlets. These are immigrant communities, brown and black communities, that have been demarginalized,” says Daniela Gerson, assistant professor of journalism at California State University, Northridge, who authored a recent report highlighting how outlets are managing to sustain themselves during the pandemic.

For this sector, these kinds of financial challenges are not new; 28 percent of the California outlets surveyed were operating at a loss even before the pandemic. According to Gerson, in addition to facing the same types of business model challenges as mainstream media overall, over the past few decades, community and immigrant-serving outlets have also had to deal with
To the residents,” as Pierre-Pierre puts it. “That’s always been the case.”

It’s been undeniable during the pandemic that community and immigrant-facing media outlets have provided a kind of service reporting that’s been essential in getting information to people who need it. Outlets like Sahajan, a non-profit dedicated to reporting for immigrants and communities of color in Minneapolis, have been on the ground providing crucial reporting on the George Floyd protests and the Derek Chauvin verdict year round, from the perspective of reporters of color. And then there are the publications providing in-language reporting on platforms where their audiences are already, whether it’s posting on messaging apps WeChat and Kafkao or using video or audio for audiences that might face language barriers.

One such outlet is Radio Indígena, a project that came out of the non-profit Mixteco that organizes indigenous farmworkers in southern California. The radio station, which started in 2014 as online-only and now includes an FM station after raising $20,000 through a community fundraising drive, reaches some of the most vulnerable people with the least access because it reports in indigenous languages like Mixteco and Zapoteco as well as Spanish.

Since Covid hit in 2020, “there was a lot of folks, especially frontline food workers, were like, ‘No, I’m going to get the vaccine,’” says Gerson, referring to her research on commercial survival strategies during the pandemic. “In many cases it was the most marginalized communities,” Pierre-Pierre says. “There’s this narrative of vaccine hesitancy that’s out there, but we also found that a lot of folks, especially frontline food workers, were like, ‘No, I’m going to get the vaccine,’ and it encouraged and showed these Mayan folks how to get it.”

Despite continuous financial and visibility challenges, many community and immigrant-facing outlets are finding ways to survive and grow even now. Outlets that have been able to embrace the shift to digital platforms have done especially well, according to California State University’s Gerson.

Last summer, “working on that report, I was thinking it could be pretty dark,” says Gerson, referring to her research on commercial survival strategies during the pandemic. “There are a lot of reasons immigrant-serving media outlets are facing challenges that go beyond local media outlets. But I also found there were really exciting ways that immigrant-serving outlets were growing and innovating and there are lessons for the media as a whole.”

The report found, for example, that outlets that are using social media platforms to develop community engagement and diversify their business streams beyond a reliance on print ads are faring especially well.

One of the other main lessons: Cultivating a relationship with the audience.

While traditional media outlets are facing a crisis in trust, experts and publishers agree that community-based media outlets are not seeing the same problems. “Most of the community media outlets, because they were community-based and really made by people in the community they serve, that wasn’t an issue,” says CUNY’s Mochosky. “Everyone saw this enormous spike in traffic and in readership because in a crisis, that’s where people turn.”

Yet that growth doesn’t necessarily translate into revenue, especially when advertisers from bigger companies often overlook community media outlets. And even for publications that follow a non-profit model, like Radio Indígena, there’s always the issue of sustainability. The pandemic has shown funders the greater need for such outlets — especially as an informational tool in the time of social distancing and mis- and disinformation — but López says it’s still a precarious endeavor. “Radio was hard to sustain before the pandemic, let’s put it that way. We don’t know what to expect tomorrow.”

Such media outlets, like the communities they serve, can’t just depend on visibility during a crisis; that’s why ad initiatives like the program in New York State can serve as an essential part of public infrastructure.

“There are still a lot of changes that need to be done in terms of recognizing the value of especially of smaller-sized media like ours,” López says. “We only see things for us when we are in a crisis or a pandemic moment. I think this is just another call for this kind of government funding.”
Reporters who have long covered the far right offer advice — and warnings — for where reporting on white nationalism and conspiracy theories should go from here

By Celeste Katz Marston

"AS EXHAUSTING A BEAT AS IT IS IMPORTANT"

But that wasn’t the first place she stopped the story — and she still remembers the way another outlet greeted the pitch.

“Theyir reply really bugged me, because it [felt like], ‘You don’t even really need to do much reporting. [Just] find some quotes online and throw together an article basically highlighting how weird this is,’” recalls Darby, who’s also editor of The Atavist Magazine. “At that point, I already saw how poor some of the coverage was of this space and how much of it treated it [as] kind of this ‘crazy thing that’s happening right now,’ as opposed to something that spoke to broader trends in American society. I felt like it was asking me to take [a] stance of dismissiveness.”

Just months after Darby’s book came out in July 2020, an insurrectionist mob stormed the U.S. Capitol to try to thwart certification of Joe Biden’s victory over Donald Trump in the 2020 presidential election. At least five people died because of the riots; four police officers subsequently committed suicide.

Dismissiveness isn’t a tenable stance when it comes to covering white nationalism, conspiracy theories, hate speech, and other forms of extremism. The storming of the Capitol centers what reporters on the far-right beat have been saying for years: America, and its media, need to take this threat seriously.

The question is, how to do so without amplifying misinformation or normalizing extremist ideologies.

Many were shocked by the violence of Jan. 6. Many who have long covered the far right, white nationalism, and conspiracy theories were decidedly not.

“These groups were underestimated for way too long,” says Melissa Gira Grant, a staff writer for The New Republic who has written extensively about the far right, white nationalism, and conspiracy theories. “Their reply really bugged me, because it [felt like], ‘You don’t even really need to do much reporting. [Just] find some quotes online and throw together an article basically highlighting how weird this is,’” recalls Darby, who’s also editor of The Atavist Magazine. “At that point, I already saw how poor some of the coverage was of this space and how much of it treated it [as] kind of this ‘crazy thing that’s happening right now,’ as opposed to something that spoke to broader trends in American society. I felt like it was asking me to take [a] stance of dismissiveness.”

Just months after Darby’s book came out in July 2020, an insurrectionist mob stormed the U.S. Capitol to try to thwart certification of Joe Biden’s victory over Donald Trump in the 2020 presidential election. At least five people died because of the riots; four police officers subsequently committed suicide.

When it comes to the political animus that started swirling around former President Donald Trump when he was still a candidate, Evan Osnos, a staff writer for The New Yorker based in Washington, notes there were precursors. Trump “was the culmination of decades of decisions in economics and politics and media,” Osnos says. As a reporter, he saw some of this for himself on the campaign trail and flagged it. Scarcely two months after Trump declared his candidacy, Osnos had a New Yorker piece noting the reality TV star’s appeal to white nationalists; the story quoted a web developer praising a Trump debate performance while “sipping coffee from a cup adorned with a swastika.”

Now, Osnos senses that outlets are less inclined to pull punches for fear of being seen as partisan. “It’s not a big-D Democratic thing to say that [Missouri Republican Senator] Josh Hawley provided essential support, ideologically and rhetorically, to the events that unfolded on Jan. 6 — full stop. [That’s] a statement of fact,” he says. “I sometimes think of journalism practices [as] learning the lessons of the last war, always.”

Coverage of Hawley, Osnos says, can underscore “the lessons of the early Trump era when people were more or less assuming that Trump was either temporary or not a serious political element.” A younger genera-
A late February *Time* story on Trump's involvement in the insurrection as a badge of honor.

"I THINK THESE PEOPLE, TO A CERTAIN EXTENT, VIEW THE PRESS AS MARKS AND ARE WORKING US. AS MUCH AS THEY HATE US, THEY'RE WORKING US,"

MELISSA GEAIRY

THE NEW REPUBLIC

PART OF THE REASON MORE OUTLETS ARE EMPHASIZING THAT RADICAL BELIEFS AMONG CERTAIN GROUPS AREN'T "FRINGE" ANYMORE, AS POINTED OUT IN A RECENT NPR REPORT ON THE THREE-FIFTHS OF WHITE EVANGELICALS WHO ARE CONVINCED PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN'S ELECTION WASN'T LEGITIMATE.

But just because beliefs aren't "fringe" anymore, they don't mean they should be normalized. Reporters consistently point to coverage of alt-right leader Richard Spencer as a great example of where the press could have been more careful about early portrayals of the standard-bearers of hate movements.

‘Just ignore it and it’ll go away’ kind of sentiment a lot of reporters also express: Move as directly as possible to expose the misleading or harmful practices of those spreading or acting on hateful ideas.

"IT’S MORE LIKE, ‘OKAY, THEY’RE PROMOTING THIS BE-"

"It’s more like, ‘Okay, they’re promoting this belief. To what end? What are they selling? What are they trying to explain to a large portion of the country, ‘What do we do about the contents of the [false] beliefs themselves?’ There’s a crossover between the anti-vax and political conspiracy worlds, and Merlan has written about how the promotion of dangerous fringe “supplements” kicked up after Trump mused about using internal disinfectants against coronavirus, for example.

"There’s something called a ‘tipping point’ that everybody on this beat has long used [to] move from just watching far-right spaces, watching conspiracy spaces, watching extreme spaces and then writing about it,” says NBC News reporter Brandon Zdrozny, who was covering extremism long before Jan. 6. "That point might come when a dangerous theory escapes a small echo chamber or is amplified by an influential person."

The political and social unrest of 2020 made the tipping-point calculus even more important because of the sheer volume of news that had to be monitored. "Disinformation was being seeded by the president of the United States and feeding extremists and hate groups, and [w]rapping back around through this feedback loop," Zdrozny recalls. "We were seemingly just trying to explain to a large portion of the country, ‘What are these people talking about? Why is it important to know [and] how does it threaten democracy?’"

In a recent opinion piece, Zdrozny points to her work on revealing "the way anti-vaccination activism uses Facebook to spread distorted stories of dead children [and] to recruit.”

"Trump being out of office and deplatformed from outlets like Twitter and Facebook will shrink that ecosystem, so they’re not just going to go away,” Zdrozny says.

The political and social unrest of 2020 made the tipping-point calculus even more important because of the sheer volume of news that had to be monitored. "Disinformation was being seeded by the president of the United States and feeding extremists and hate groups, and [w]rapping back around through this feedback loop," Zdrozny recalls. "We were seemingly just trying to explain to a large portion of the country, ‘What are these people talking about? Why is it important to know [and] how does it threaten democracy?’"

In a recent opinion piece, Zdrozny points to her work on revealing "the way anti-vaccination activism uses Facebook to spread distorted stories of dead children [and] to recruit.”

"Trump being out of office and deplatformed from outlets like Twitter and Facebook will shrink that ecosystem, so they’re not just going to go away,” Zdrozny says.

The political and social unrest of 2020 made the tipping-point calculus even more important because of the sheer volume of news that had to be monitored. "Disinformation was being seeded by the president of the United States and feeding extremists and hate groups, and [w]rapping back around through this feedback loop," Zdrozny recalls. "We were seemingly just trying to explain to a large portion of the country, ‘What are these people talking about? Why is it important to know [and] how does it threaten democracy?’"

In a recent opinion piece, Zdrozny points to her work on revealing "the way anti-vaccination activism uses Facebook to spread distorted stories of dead children [and] to recruit.”

"Trump being out of office and deplatformed from outlets like Twitter and Facebook will shrink that ecosystem, so they’re not just going to go away,” Zdrozny says.

The political and social unrest of 2020 made the tipping-point calculus even more important because of the sheer volume of news that had to be monitored. "Disinformation was being seeded by the president of the United States and feeding extremists and hate groups, and [w]rapping back around through this feedback loop," Zdrozny recalls. "We were seemingly just trying to explain to a large portion of the country, ‘What are these people talking about? Why is it important to know [and] how does it threaten democracy?’"

In a recent opinion piece, Zdrozny points to her work on revealing "the way anti-vaccination activism uses Facebook to spread distorted stories of dead children [and] to recruit.”

"Trump being out of office and deplatformed from outlets like Twitter and Facebook will shrink that ecosystem, so they’re not just going to go away,” Zdrozny says.
When something does rise to the level of a story, reporters versed in extremism use some common guideposts in their coverage.

Right off, it’s worth knowing the media can’t and won’t fix everything. There are inherent problems with believing even hyper-aggressive coverage of figures like Marjorie Taylor Greene, the QAnon supporter elected to Congress from Georgia in 2020, must naturally lead to their re-election, says Lawrence Rosenthal, chair of the Berkeley Center for Right-Wing Studies and author of “Empire of Resentment: Populism’s Toxic Embrace of Nationalism.”

“Let me tell you: I would much rather, based on the political reporting of the past five years, base my claims on the idea that identity and how it shapes politics is not a story about minorities. When it comes to covering the post-Jan. 6 world, says The New Yorker’s Osnos, “We’re going to have to be determined to figure out the ideological origins, no matter where they lie, as we were after 9/11. That is going to be uncomfortable for a lot of people, because it’s going to mean understanding the role of powerful institutions in this country, including the police and Department of Homeland Security and Christian nationalism and other things that have really not been subject to the same level of scrutiny.”

Extremism is as exhausting a beast as it is important, and Seyward Darby readily admits there are days she wouldn’t mind covering something else. “They count on the fact that we’re going to get bored, are going to stop writing, and we’re going to give up. This is why the sustained shining of a well-positioned light is important, because they’re going to keep doing what they’re doing,” she says. “We should not let them have that opportunity.”
LESSONS FROM THE PANDEMIC

Can — or should — journalism return to a pre-Covid normal?
The word had so thoroughly infiltrated the language that I no longer noticed it. Then one afternoon, walking across a windy plaza, it brought me to a full stop. A coffee shop had printed it on a long, wide banner, promoting not their coffee but the antiseptic means by which we could purchase it. Our new human condition, a sort of soulless sequestration, had a watchword.

Contactless

The banner may have ended with an exclamation point but I can’t recall. No matter; it was implied. Here was a business that knew, deep into the pandemic, what we wanted. We wanted less, to the point of none. Contact-less. No contact.

Before the pandemic, the U.S. had not been as quick to adapt to cashless, contactless commerce as some other countries, but our resistance fell as the spread of Covid-19 grew and we sought to lower our risk without sacrificing necessity or pleasure. I remember a friend giddily reporting that a neighborhood ice cream parlor would now deliver sundaes — sundaes — to her front porch without her ever so much as seeing another human being.

But what kept us safe also kept us isolated and for journalism, this was crippling.

I kept thinking of the old photojournalism aphorism attributed to the street photographer Arthur Fellig, better known as Weegee: “f8 and be there.” But being there — being anywhere these past 18 months — was risky. Entire beats vanished, and so the theater critics, sports reporters, travel writers and others who covered newly-shuttered industries were redeployed to report a public health story for which they had no experience. The less lucky were furloughed or worse.

“During the pandemic, we [learned] to cover the country without leaving our houses,” Lisa Lerer, New York
Times political correspondent, writes in this issue. “The mythology of getting a window into the soul of America became a view of my shower curtain, as I conducted interviews in the only room in my apartment with a lock to keep out remote-schooling children. It was easy to miss the access to voters, strategists, and political officials; the kind of reporting serendipity that sometimes happens just by showing up.”

Journalists met hardship with ingenuity to narrow the distance that the deadly virus forced on reporting. Photographers gowned in personal protective equipment got as close to a story as they could or made so-called “porch portraits” of subjects posing outside their homes. Reporters used Google hangouts, asked subjects to keep audio diaries, and observed their activities via open video lines. The industry pressed for state-of-emergency remote video access to government meetings, then pressed again to continue that access beyond the early months of the Covid crisis. But not all journalism is contactless and for some, it proved lethal. The Press Emblem Campaign, a Swiss press rights advocate, has tracked the Covid deaths of journalists, a number that has reached 1,798 in 81 countries. The organization has also pushed for early access to vaccination for journalists globally. “The safety of media workers is particularly at risk in this crisis because they must continue to provide information on the ground,” the organization argued. “A number of them died for lack of adequate protective measures when doing their job.”

In the spring of 2020, Kristen Hare, an editor at ProPublica, started collecting the obituaries of media workers. The virus did not favor rank. The deaths have included “newspaper owners, cameramen, broadcast pioneers, writers, retirees, young par- ents,” Hare wrote, and a project she thought would be short-lived is now in its second year. “This isn’t just something that we’re covering, it’s something that we’re living through and, in some cases, suffering from,” she told me. “I think it can be easy for journalists to feel like a third party in their communities, but this disease does not recognize that distinction.”

But not all journalism is contactless and for some, it proved lethal. The Press Emblem Campaign, a Swiss press rights advocate, has tracked the Covid deaths of journalists, a number that has reached 1,798 in 81 countries. The organization has also pushed for early access to vaccination for journalists globally. “The safety of media workers is particularly at risk in this crisis because they must continue to provide information on the ground,” the organization argued. “A number of them died for lack of adequate protective measures when doing their job.”

Or long ago, as the U.S. marked a grim milestone of 300,000 Covid dead and hopes for a quick end to the pandemic was fading, I reread Drew Faust’s extraordinary 2008 book about death during the American Civil War. As the pan- demic’s toll ticked ever upward — now 671,000 U.S. dead, 4.5 million worldwide — I sought some insight into writing about loss on this scale and looked to America’s bloodiest conflict, a war that killed 620,000 soldiers and an undocumented number of civilians. Especially haunting was Faust’s description of soldiers seeking technological surrogates as they lay dying, an eerie resemblance to stories of Covid patients in hospital deathbeds, connected to loved ones via iPads. She tells of Yankee soldier Amos Humiston, found at Gettysburg clasping an ambrystope of his three children, Franklin, Alice and Frederick. “Denied the presence of actual kin,” Faust writes, “many dying men removed pictures from pockets or knapsacks and spent their last moments communicating with these representations of absent loved ones.”

But if war is the work of dying, Faust’s book is a reminder that there is work ahead in grieving — a particular challenge for journalism, which is better at covering action than absence. “The whole notion of mourning is that it is a process,” Faust told me, “moving through a world in which the lost are no longer with you, sewing up any pockets or knapsacks and spent their last moments communicating with these representations of absent loved ones.”

But if war is the work of dying, Faust’s book is a reminder that there is work ahead in grieving — a particular challenge for journalism, which is better at covering action than absence. “The whole notion of mourning is that it is a process,” Faust told me, “moving through a world in which the lost are no longer with you, sewing up any pockets or knapsacks and spent their last moments communicating with these representations of absent loved ones.”

She talked about the beauty and power of Civil War era mourning customs — moving from a wardrobe of black, to grey, then adding purple, each step causing “emotional forward motion” — and prescribed for a nation the same work Hare had for journalists. “We haven’t had the rituals, the monuments, the community gatherings,” Faust said. “And that can’t be left undone if we are to return to a world post- post and not just stay stuck in our loss.”

The other morning I walked my dog past the soccer pitch of an elementary school. A young boy ran up to the fence that separated us and called out to me. “He’s so cute,” the boy said through his mask. He roused down to sniff level and wriggled his fingers through the chain link. I asked if he had a dog at home and in the next minute learned that he had a cat named Butter, that the cat was missing a front leg, and that the boy was starting his second day of fourth grade. A friend beckoned from across the field and the boy rose to leave, looked back once, then sprinted away. It was such a modest moment, not the sort I would have tuck away pre-Covid, but that now I do. It was the unfinished stories of Butter and returning to school. It was the promise of what we’ve been missing. It was contact.

Aboke: The pre- kindergarten group from the Boys and Girls Club visit through the window with members of the supportive daycare program at the Froio Senior Center in Pittsfield, Mass. in Nov. 2020
THE OLD NORMAL IS NOT THE NORMAL JOURNALISM NEEDS

GEORGE FLOYD WAS ALIVE the last time my newsroom was filled.

Think about that.

So were over 600,000 Americans and four million citizens of the world, now lost to the plague of Covid-19.

Donald Trump was president, the news cycle dominated by his tweets. An insurrection at the U.S. Capitol was unthinkable. Zoom was barely known or widely understood in the general population. We walked and talked and knocked on doors and flitted in and out of crowds like always, without a care or a vat of hand sanitizer.

We had no idea that in a matter of months we would come to judge friends and strangers, instantly, by whether they shielded their faces or not. And they would judge us.

My newsroom at Alabama Media Group under the Advance Local umbrella remains closed to this day and will until it is deemed safe to return. My co-workers hope — or perhaps fear — reopening will come too soon. We hope the virus is contained, that people and communities and states and worlds embrace vaccination at the levels required to lead us back to normalcy. We fear it will not be enough, for the old or the sick or for the immune compromised. Or simply for the unlucky.

Such is the nature of Covid.

Frontline workers — doctors and nurses and reporters and grocery store stockers and uber drivers and on and on and on — have taken on the world all along, from behind their masks. But for those of us who have worked from home for the last year-plus, the opening of newsrooms and classrooms and other places of employment is filled with hope and fear.

I hope the world is ready. I fear it is not.

I hope I am ready. I fear I am not.

I hope my dogs are ready to be alone for a while. I know they are not.

I hope to soon knock on a door and be welcomed inside for an interview, a conversation. I fear my presence will cause anxiety, on both sides of that door, that will make real talk more difficult.

I hope to see friends and coworkers and bosses and sources again. I know — we all know — they will not all be there.

It will be hard to return, whenever that time comes. In the pandemic we discarded old habits and fell into new ones, new patterns of eating, sleeping, working, exercising, living. We have grown accustomed to reclusiveness, to rolling out of bed for meetings, to calisthenics on the living room rug between Zooms, to apologizing to sources for barking dogs or crying babies or bedhead or bad wi-fi.

But returning to a communal world holds a thrill.

We need human contact to feel human, and we need to feel human to report the stories of humanity. We need eye contact to fully connect to one another. We need to overhear each other to fuel that serendipity that occurs in newsrooms, when a comment leads to a conversation which leads to questions which lead to stories which lead to understanding.

I hope we learned lessons from the pandemic to take forward. It is easy to see now that emotional health must be a priority in newsrooms as in other workplaces, that in addition to being the right thing to do it encourages creativity and production and endurance and satisfaction.

We know that hybrid work arrangements make sense, that one does not have to always be in an office to be part of the office, that virtual meetings can serve as an often-more-efficient substitute. But we know too that office interactions build teamwork, and trust, and collaboration, and relationships. And those things form the foundation of good work.

I would like to say, as 2020 drags across 2021, that I hope we get back to normal. But old normal is not the normal we need. Not in journalism, and not in the world.

The world is a very different place. George Floyd is dead, and Derek Chauvin a convicted murderer. We have begun this thing they called a “racial reckoning,” but real reckoning has yet to come. It will take work, and commitment, and retaining those things learned — if not from 400 years of history — from a year-plus of tragedy and chaos and change.

It is the same in journalism, as in life. We change, with any hope of holding on to the good and discarding the bad. We live and we learn. Or we don’t really live at all.

The opening of newsrooms is filled with hope and fear. But we need human contact to feel human, and we need to feel human to report the stories of humanity.
The Newsroom is Dead.
Long Live the Newsroom

I asked a friend the other day if he was eager to get back to the newsroom we once shared. The publisher had indicated that the doors will soon reopen, with people returning for staggered shifts.

My friend’s response was flat: “The newsroom we knew is gone. And it isn’t coming back.”

He wasn’t talking about the physical space, which sprawled over three downtown buildings and six buildings a few years ago. The future will have staffers from all departments working on one rented floor.

His lament was for the newsrooms that shaped those of us from a certain generation — ones filled with page-longing and shave-bowls and high-low deadlines and the constant fear you’d get beat or get something wrong. But also filled with passion and purpose and creativity and the most interesting people I’ve ever known.

At their worst, the newsrooms in my career weren’t boring. At their best, they crackled.

— and focus on what truly matters.

Covid has forced true change, much of it long overdue.

New journalists — editors and reporters alike — must resist the temptation to return to old rhythms.

Engelbart burrowed inside events and emotions at the Washington nursing home that was the nation’s first Covid hot spot. She reported it all by phone, text, and email from her apartment in Toronto.

Josh Sanburn used a hybrid of in-person and remote reporting to take us inside an overwhelmed nursing home in the U.S. To report “The Last of the First Responders,” published in Vanity Fair, he wove through storage rooms crowded with caskets waiting for burial, and peered into refrigerator trucks holding more bodies. But much of the emotion of the piece came from the hours he spent on the phone, late into the night, talking to the funeral home director.

Maybe this year of crisis has taught us things we needed to learn and relearn. Publishers had to get clear about the primacy of digital. Readers have hungered for the three most important purposes journalism can serve: Holding power to account, providing essential information, and exploring humanity. And reporters have found ways to do all of that, limits be damned.

First, when the newsroom doors reopen, keep the meetings out. Nothing douses the crackle faster than a bunch of editors traipsing in and out of meetings. Schedule in-person gatherings for snappy brainstorms — turn on all of your senses and immerse yourself in stories. Keep the editors informed — but get back into the newsroom.

Second, don’t let the limits of time, proximity, or even budgets impose limits on your aspirations, even — and maybe especially — if your aspirations reach toward narrative. It’s way too tempting to think, “They won’t let me,” instead of wondering, “How can I?” Look at the work you and your colleagues have done in the past year. Remember how you did that work — and what you might do even better once the Covid cloud lifts.

There’s no substitute for eyewitness journalism, whether it’s to face down a dodgy official or observe the moments that create narrative. If you can’t be on the scene yourself, you need to turn your sources into surrogates who can bring you as full a story as possible. Ask the kind of questions that help them describe the sounds and sights and smells of their worlds. Help them understand the kind of information you need to write a story that has the full power of the human experience.


Engelbart burrowed inside events and emotions at the Washington nursing home that was the nation’s first Covid hot spot. She reported it all by phone, text, and email from her apartment in Toronto.

Josh Sanburn used a hybrid of in-person and remote reporting to take us inside an overwhelmed nursing home in the U.S. To report “The Last of the First Responders,” published in Vanity Fair, he wove through storage rooms crowded with caskets waiting for burial, and peered into refrigerator trucks holding more bodies. But much of the emotion of the piece came from the hours he spent on the phone, late into the night, talking to the funeral home director.

Maybe this year of crisis has taught us things we needed to learn and relearn. Publishers had to get clear about the primacy of digital. Readers have hungered for the three most important purposes journalism can serve: Holding power to account, providing essential information, and exploring humanity. And reporters have found ways to do all of that, limits be damned.

First, when the newsroom doors reopen, keep the meetings out. Nothing douses the crackle faster than a bunch of editors traipsing in and out of meetings. Schedule in-person gatherings for snappy brainstorms — turn on all of your senses and immerse yourself in stories. Keep the editors informed — but get back into the newsroom.

Second, don’t let the limits of time, proximity, or even budgets impose limits on your aspirations, even — and maybe especially — if your aspirations reach toward narrative. It’s way too tempting to think, “They won’t let me,” instead of wondering, “How can I?” Look at the work you and your colleagues have done in the past year. Remember how you did that work — and what you might do even better once the Covid cloud lifts.

There’s no substitute for eyewitness journalism, whether it’s to face down a dodgy official or observe the moments that create narrative. If you can’t be on the scene yourself, you need to turn your sources into surrogates who can bring you as full a story as possible. Ask the kind of questions that help them describe the sounds and sights and smells of their worlds. Help them understand the kind of information you need to write a story that has the full power of the human experience.

FOR VISUAL JOURNALISTS, THE PANDEMIC WAS CREATIVE INSPIRATION TO TRY HARDER

THE PANDEMIC BROUGHT OUT the very best in my teammates.

I’m the director of photo/video at the Star Tribune in Minneapolis. Throughout my 22 years at the paper, I’ve observed plenty of stellar photojournalism. But this past year was different.

As our newsroom shut down and most of us headed home to do our work, our photographers and videographers headed out to document the shutdown of Minnesota.

Journalists, especially news photographers, are used to going towards danger. That’s part of the job. But early on, when we didn’t know exactly how the virus was transmitted, everyone on my team was cognizant that they could become vectors of the illness, spreading the disease as they went from assignment to assignment.

The early lesson for the photo and video team was that they had to treat everyone they encountered as if they carried the virus. Masks, long lenses, outdoor photo shoots only, and wiping down equipment over and over again with Clorox wipes was a daily, repetitive experience. All the commonplace activities to photograph — a Timberwolves basketball game, a street festival, school kids learning in a classroom — suddenly were no more. The world ground to a halt, making it seem almost impossible to do any meaningful photojournalism.

Law enforcement officers amassed along Lake Street near Hiawatha Ave. in Minneapolis as fires burned after a night of unrest and protests in response to the death of George Floyd.
But rather than see all these things as roadblocks, my team took the pandemic as creative inspiration to try harder. Without waiting for reporters to make assignments, the photo/video staff spread through the Twin Cities to find their own stories. Like the out-of-work opera singer who did a concert off his condo balcony to entertain his neighbors. Or the woman praising the Lord with upraised arms in her car during parking lot church. And the 112-year-old celebrating her birthday at her window, waving at the passing car parade in her honor.

By the time we got to the end of May, the team had become very used to taking photos and video at least six feet from their subjects. But the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin changed all that. Suddenly, photographers were deep in the midst of chaotic and crowded protests. Every safety measure taken in the preceding three months went out the window. The virus seemed like a secondary worry to the dangers presented by the National Guard, law enforcement, and some of the protesters.

Faced with an abundance of very visual news to cover, the photographers captured the unfolding historical reckoning happening right in our backyard. It was like the 1992 Los Angeles riots and Selma-to-Montgomery marches happening all at once.

For the photo editors, the Floyd protests were a challenge to explain the root of the anger spilling onto the streets, and not let the images of looting or arson represent anything more than a symptom of the larger problem of racism. They took care to choose images that didn't flinch from showing what was happening, but also didn't put undue emphasis on property destruction over human anguish.

It's now been more than a year since those protests and the pandemic began. What have we learned? While so much has changed, it doesn't take much to also realize that much remains the same. A few months ago, right before the Chauvin verdict, another Minnesota Black man, Daunte Wright, was killed at the hands of a police officer.

Again, the photo and video staff were back out on the streets, covering night after night of protests outside the Brooklyn Center Police Department. But we did it differently. We spent time inside one of the nearby apartments to capture what it was like for the residents to have tear gas waft into their homes. We took a pass when offered an opportunity to embed with law enforcement on the other side of the fence from the protesters, not wanting to become their unwitting mouthpieces.

These are little examples, but real ones that speak to how the pandemic and the racial reckoning were a reminder that the bedrock essence of our work is to tell people's stories. At a time when safety demanded that we remain isolated, photojournalists did the heroic work of still going out there to be with people, talk with people, and photograph people. Doing this provided a lifeline for all those unable to leave their homes to see what was happening with their own eyes.

As we all emerge from the pandemic, we can't go back to business as usual. The pandemic and the death of George Floyd taught us that we are all inextricably linked — photojournalists and subjects alike. We have a responsibility to tell people's stories in full and nuanced ways, just as we would want our own stories told. We can't cover communities of color only when the worst news happens. When we are covering protests, we have to take the time to find out how our subjects want to be portrayed, especially if they are from communities we don't cover regularly. It's about respect.

Ultimately, we are with people on their very best day and their very worst day. How we tell their story of that day matters. Photojournalists' work is simple but important. Maybe now more than ever.
COVERAGE OF THE VACCINE IN EUROPE HURT MEDIA TRUST. NEWS OUTLETS NEED TO WIN IT BACK

ON MARCH 12, 2021, La Repubblica, Italy’s most widely circulated and trusted newspaper, placed a chilling headline on its front page: “AstraZeneca, Fear across Europe.”

Some reports linked the vaccine developed by Oxford University to a few unusual cases of blood clots, and several European countries were considering suspending its distribution. In my country, Italy, prosecutors were investigating the deaths of some individuals who passed away days or weeks after getting their jabs. But the connection between the vaccine and some severe side effects was not established. The European Medicines Agency (EMA) did not ban or discourage any government from distributing the AstraZeneca vaccine and, after carefully reviewing the evidence, affirmed that the “very rare” link with blood clots and confirmed that serious adverse events were “very rare.” “The benefits of the vaccine ... continue to outweigh the risk of side effects,” the EMA wrote in a statement.

As it turned out, many other things have a stronger association with serious thrombosis than the AstraZeneca vaccine, like taking a contraceptive pill or boarding a commercial flight; not to mention Covid itself. As of March 22, the EMA had reviewed 86 cases of unusual thrombosis reported in the EU drug safety database, which collects information on the European Economic Area and the U.K.; at that point, some 25 million people had already received the AstraZeneca vaccine. Statistically, a person is more likely to be struck by lightning or die in an accident at home than to experience fatal side effects from the AstraZeneca vaccine. When La Repubblica ran its much-discussed headline, the vaccine was safe, effective, and only associated with very rare serious adverse effects.

However, the scare was amplified by the media, and La Repubblica’s headline stood out. Its language suggested to readers how they should feel, instead of describing the facts upon which readers should base their feelings. La Repubblica referred to fear. Il Corriere della Sera’s coverage focused on the different approaches taken by different EU countries. And as time went by, coverage proved to be more nuanced and responsible than the headlines that dominated the early days of the case. Weeks later, La Repubblica ran a series of stories illustrating how, for instance, “Aspirin is more dangerous than the AstraZeneca vaccine.” This is to say that trust needs to be continually earned. That’s a lesson newsrooms all over the world are learning, sometimes the hard way.

It’s hard to know how the pandemic will affect newsrooms in the long run, but trustworthiness and credibility should be at the center of our efforts to build a healthier media ecosystem.

Step back. And things got worse. A few days after the first reports about the potentially fatal blood clots appeared, several European nations, including Germany, France, and Italy, temporarily suspended distribution of the AstraZeneca vaccine, calling for the EMA to review the case.

The political decision provided a sense of legitimacy to the unsubstantiated idea that the risks associated with the vaccine outweighed its benefits, reinforcing the alarmist narrative promoted by some news outlets. That introduced a new dimension to the problem of credibility for the media. In order to gain trust, the media would have to challenge the whole political decision-making process, even though the governments justified it by appealing to the “precautionary principle” or pledging total transparency over vaccine side effects. In the end, the EMA confirmed what it had never denied in the first place: The vaccine was safe, effective, and only associated with very rare serious adverse effects.

But the whole uproar contributed to the erosion of people’s trust in the AstraZeneca vaccine. An under-secretary in Italy’s Ministry of Health estimated that 15 to 20 percent of the Italian population would end up refusing the AstraZeneca jab. Undoubtedly, some media contributed to amplifying its risks while implicitly downplaying the enormous benefits to the many millions of people who had been safely vaccinated already.

Other outlets attempted to offer a more balanced, data-based approach. “Tension in Europe over AstraZeneca,” the legacy newspaper Il Corriere della Sera wrote in a front-page headline the same day as La Repubblica referred to fear. Il Corriere della Sera’s coverage focused on the different approaches taken by different EU countries. And as time went by, coverage proved to be more nuanced and responsible than the headlines that dominated the early days of the case. Weeks later, La Repubblica ran a series of stories illustrating how, for instance, “Aspirin is more dangerous” than the AstraZeneca vaccine.

The AstraZeneca case is a cautionary tale for journalists chasing the ultimate good — trust. In the early stages of the pandemic, media all over the world struggled to provide trustworthy, evidence-based information, and even to admit “we don’t know” when that was the case. In a sense, the pandemic was an exercise in humility. It forced reporters and editors to face a plethora of unknowns and to refrain from giving credit to unsubstantiated claims or poorly vetted sources. But in time, as the media grew more confident in covering the crisis, the risk of complacency also grew, and the bond of trust painstakingly built with readers has again been put to the test.

The coverage of the AstraZeneca story captures the idea that trust is not gained once and for all. Trust needs to be earned, and then earned again, every day. It’s a marathon, not a sprint. That’s a lesson media all over the world are learning — sometimes the hard way.

It’s hard to know how the pandemic will affect newsrooms in the long run, but trustworthiness and credibility should be at the center of our efforts to build a healthier media ecosystem.
For Political Reporters, There Will Be No “Return to Normal”

Back in October of Last Year, seven months into the pandemic, life in this fast-growing exurb wasn’t exactly normal, but it sure seemed close. A few weeks before the presidential election, maskless people strolled through the center of town, ducking into restaurants and shops as they enjoyed a sunny Fall afternoon.

“I feel like you’re inhibiting yourself when you’re wearing a mask,” Rachel Antonelli, a pregnant bank teller, said when I interviewed her on the street corner in Delaware, Ohio. She recalled how “credible news sources” — articles posted by friends on social media — reported that you could catch the virus from wearing a mask, a view clearly contradicted by nearly all public health experts. Skeptical of the science and against closures, she took a fairly fatalistic view of the pandemic: “If you are a person that’s going to get it, you’re going to get it.”

That was hardly the prevailing attitude just 20 miles south in Westerville, where restaurants stood empty and nearly everyone was masked. As she walked through an outdoor shopping center, Party Jordan, a carefully double-masked retiree, worried about the virus and feared the lack of more stringent restrictions was costing lives. Trump, she said, “needs to take responsibility” for his role in spreading illness and death across the country. Jordan, as you probably can guess, was a Biden voter.

In a different time, the pandemic would have been the kind of once-in-a-generation event that rallied a nation. A moment of national crisis, where we all rolled up our sleeves, rationed our sugar and sewed sweaters — or at least Tweeted some supportive messages. But from our early days of sourdough baking, there hasn’t been a whole lot of national unity. As college students packed South Dakota bars, restaurants shuttered in New Mexico. While more than 300 million people collected unemployment, the country’s billionaires saw their assets grow by $1.3 trillion. Even illness itself proved to be unequal: Being Black means you are three times as likely to get infected.

Our lived realities of the past year have been vastly different. But perhaps more importantly, when it comes to our politics, so have our perceptions. We simply don’t believe the same set of facts, even when it comes to an issue as essential as our own mortality.

This is a political problem of the most fundamental kind: a decline of agreement on central facts. Some scholars have even given an ominous name to our new reality — “truth decay.” That lack of consensus has blustered into our daily lives. Studies have found that the biggest predictor of local mask use was not demographic characteristics or local policy, but the percentage of people in the area that voted for Donald Trump in 2016.

Increasingly, our politics are defined by two hostile identity groups who see the other not only as political opponents but as threatening and immoral. In Washington, bipartisan compromise feels nearly unimaginable. And beyond the Capitol, the two parties aren’t even having the same conversation, never mind speaking to each other. One survey in March found that Republicans had heard more about the “cancelling” of Dr. Seuss than the $1.9 trillion stimulus package. Hatred between Republicans and Democrats, according to an analysis by some prominent political scientists, now “exceeds long standing antipathies around race and religion.”

For those of us who cover politics, explaining this widening gap required developing a new set of skills. So, we educated ourselves in fantastical conspiracy theories. We learned to call our presidential lies, even in our news chyrons. We dropped “bothsiderism” to call out attacks on our democracy, like fighting the results of a legitimate election. And we wrote about race in new ways, tracking the impact of views long constrained to the fringes of our political debate on our national conversation.

During the pandemic, we did all of that while learning to cover the country without leaving our houses. The mythology of getting a window into the soul of America became a view of my shower curtain, as I conducted interviews in the only room in my apartment with a lock to keep out remote-schooling children. It was easy to miss the access to voters, strategists, and politicians the kind of reporting serendipity that sometimes happens just by showing up.

But we all found ways to innovate the conventions of political reporting, changing the decades-old rhythms and day-to-day logistics of news gathering. I tracked down voters by phone and devoted some of those hours that would have been spent in airports to coverage of voting rights.

Before the pandemic, political journalists often wrote about then-primary candidate Joe Biden as a kind of restoration, a reversion to the political norms that we covered for decades. Some of those traditions have already returned to Washington, roiled by the chaos of the Trump years. The daily White House press briefing is back, as are policy papers and quieter weekends.

But political journalists would be wise not to let that perception of normalcy fool them. The country will face a long period of clean-up from policy choices made during this period. Children suffering the consequences of a “lost year.” Job losses that upended savings and securities for so many families. Mental illness and grief that will linger. Pandemics are times of massive upheaval and the national impact doesn’t end when we finally take off our masks.

As I look toward the future that awaits us after the pandemic, I can’t stop thinking about those two Ohio towns. There is no “return to normal” coming to those places, no grand unification of their beliefs, news sources, and values. Sure, we may attend campaign rallies once again.

But America will be different. And it will take all of our skills — both the traditional and those we learned in the crisis — to cover the new reality.
IN POLARIZED TIMES, LOCAL PAPERS NEED TO LEAN EVEN HARDER INTO TOUGH ISSUES

WHEN I WAS 12, my buddy Robbie Davis and I went to see the movie Titanic. When my dad picked us up that evening, he asked us how we enjoyed the film. I told him about the special effects, action, and adventure in the blockbuster. Robbie shrugged and said, “It was a love story.”

There’s a lesson here on how polarization works in America. At its essence, polarization boils down to a split in the narrative. You see some movies as a romance, but a different storyline. I see action and adventure, and Robbie sees love.

Words and language matter here. Characterizations do, too. How do you describe the demonstrations that happened this past summer? Were they “the protests” or “the riots?” Or was the situation in your town different from those monikers?

The events of 2020 — the pandemic, the aftermath of George Floyd’s death, and the election results — will likely color our politics for the next generation. Inequalities and disparities in our society were put in stark relief, with different interpretations of the remedies for them.

We at local newspapers need to keep that context at the forefront of our minds when we think about our readership. We’ve faced these split narratives in the American story before. In the 1960s, the Civil Rights movement, the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and John F. Kennedy, and the Vietnam War divided the Baby Boom generation. It was either a time that led to great societal change or moral rebellion, the moment we turned our backs on our troops or fought a war that lacked moral authority.

The split narrative continues in our debates over the symbols left from the Civil War or the significance of the years 1776 and 1819. The temptation will be strong in the name of clicks and metrics for local news outlets to barter in the hyperbolic rhetoric seen on some cable programs. But resisting these forces in favor of the steeper, harder climb will likely pay a significant return on investment in due time.

We may not be able to change the way people in our readership view the larger events surrounding 2020, but we can write authoritatively about the year’s events and their lingering effects at the local level. Tools that will be indispensable in this era will be audience surveys, focus groups, and demographic data to help us better understand the way readers view the world. Local news outlets have a unique ability to dig deeper at the ground level into issues affecting their communities. We shouldn’t try to adopt the “one size fits all” approach taken in some national media outlets to boe-button issues.

And there are few things that polarize our country more right now than issues of race. Race is exceptional and more complex. The temptation will be strong in the name of clicks and metrics for local news outlets to barter in the hyperbolic rhetoric seen on some cable programs. But resisting these forces in favor of the steeper, harder climb will likely pay a significant return on investment in due time.

When it comes to these topics, specificity is your ally. When we temper our overarching journalistic mission of fearlessly seeking the truth with these values of grace and empathy, we get necessary reader buy-in. That means exercising humility in terms of what we understand about people’s intentions and making sure we make accuracy a non-negotiable priority. Hard-earned experience has shown that we can write the toughest of stories and treat people fairly, earning trust from the reader.

While a powerful politician or celebrity might merit more scrutiny for doing something racially insensitive or having a minor scuffle with the law, we need to apply different, careful standards to cases involving kids in our communities and those who are not public figures.

We also need to consider our role and responsibilities in setting community narratives. The Boston Globe recently adopted a Fresh Start program to allow people to have stories anonymized or updated to help address historical inequities of coverage.

When we temper our overarching journalistic mission of fearlessly seeking the truth with these values of grace and empathy, we get necessary reader buy-in. That means exercising humility in terms of what we understand about people’s intentions and making sure we make accuracy a non-negotiable priority. Hard-earned experience has shown that we can write the toughest of stories and treat people fairly, earning trust from the reader. By making sure we’re encapsulating the totality of the debate, we can provide nuanced, equitable coverage — and avoid the pitfalls of split narratives. After all, Titanic is a love story with plenty of action, too.
Despite the events of the past year, there is hope on the horizon. Many of us have received our second dose of the vaccine and many of our communities are approaching being fully vaccinated, so much so that some tribes are now offering the vaccine to non-Indigenous people.

Much has been lost in our communities, this is true. When workplaces open up again and the first beat of a live-in-person powwow sounds off, there will be many who are not there with us. As part of my Nieman Visiting Fellowship, I’m creating an online memorial to remember the Indigenous elders we have lost to Covid-19. The loss of these citizens — the bearers of our languages and traditional ways — due to coronavirus has impacted all of our communities. The goal is to share their stories and the impact their absence will have on their communities and the people closest to them.

For so many national news outlets, the reopening will mean the job is done. Their reporters will move on until the next existential crisis strikes our lands. They are there when the ship in Indian Country capsizes and sinks but are absent when it’s finally dragged out of the water, rebuilt, and made even stronger.

At this point, every newsroom across America has an opportunity to do things differently, to bypass a harmful industry trend. Every journalist should be asking themselves: What’s next for Indian Country, and how do I tell that story?

For us at Native News Online, the work continues. The true impact of Covid-19 in Indian Country may take years to fully understand, largely because of a severe lack of data. We will continue reporting on the victories in Indian Country. We’re covering the growing number of tribes setting up their own broadband networks, which will make telehealth and distance learning possible; efforts to reclaim food sovereignty and increase access to healthy traditional foods; and the various ways tribal governments will be spending the $20 billion allotted to them through the American Rescue Plan — all of which should be on every newsroom’s editorial calendar.

We will be there when the powwows and cultural festivals kick off, and we will continue examining the impact Covid-19 has had on our elders and languages and on major industries such as casinos and tourism. When my editor Levi and I celebrated the Navajo Nation’s zero-case milestone a few weeks ago, we considered discontinuing our daily “Navajo update.” We thought, who wants to read good news going forward? We quickly decided against the idea. Indian Country has lost a lot over the past year, but equally important are the efforts to ensure that what was lost to coronavirus is being reborn. This is just as newsworthy.
“A WAKE IN WORDS”

WHEN I STARTED TO ATTEND WAKES as a girl, I told my father I didn’t know what to say or do. “It was simple,” he said. “You extended your hand and said, ‘I’m sorry for your troubles.’” He and my mother always showed up for wakes. It was one of the ways they stayed close to the friends who, like them, came to America on long journeys by ocean liner. In the 1990s, before Skype or Zoom could have kept them connected to their native Ireland, friends became family.

When Bill and Peggy O’Donnell died, their friends showed up. There were probably 600 people at each of my parents’ wakes and funerals. A good send-off, as the Irish say. The Year of Covid took that away. Six people couldn’t come together to say goodbye, never mind 600.

I’ve been an obituary writer at the Chicago Sun-Times for about 12 years. But during the pandemic, I felt a new weight of responsibility. I’ve talked about it with other members of The Society of Professional Obituary Writers.

We sensed that what we wrote was becoming a substitute for public mourning rituals: a wake in words. The Covid-19 crisis has highlighted the value of obituaries in a time when newsrooms are shrinking, and obituaries often get outsourced. They reflect the history, identity, and values of the communities we cover. Readers and viewers respond to them. As we move forward into a (hopefully) post-pandemic world, it’s important to remember how journalists and news organizations — and obituaries — were part of getting through this crisis.

During the pandemic, I tried even harder to seek out quotes, not just from relatives of the deceased, but from their employers and friends and restaurant customers. From fellow tango dancers and gospel singers and dart players.

Social media — always an important source of early news alerts — became a lifeline and deathline. On March 17, 2020, Fiona Whelan Prine posted on Facebook that she’d tested positive for the coronavirus. I started watching for updates. Before her husband, John Prine, was critically ill with the virus.

I started to write: John Prine’s lyrics were like Edward Hopper paintings. His songs conjured empty Greyhound stations, pawnshops, rusty railroad tracks, flies in the kitchen and nights with too much tequila. I hoped the advance obituary would be left unused.

Days after her post, Mr. Prine’s family revealed he was critically ill with the virus. When he died, some people in Chicago felt as if they’d lost a relative. As the pandemic continued, I could see, through paid death notices and social media, how our rituals were mutating. Grief was exacerbated by the absence of human touch. Elbow bumps felt inadequate, whether the cause of death was the coronavirus or something else.

Often, obituary writers listened to people describing their pain at not being able to hug each other or wipe away tears. I started writing about streamed graveside services and “wakes on wheels” — drive-thru wakes.

Funeral home parking lots no longer feature the orange cones that guided mourners past windows where they paid respects through glass. But I think streamed services and Zoom wakes are here to stay. Like obituaries, they offer vulnerable and immunocompromised people something precious and healing — the chance to connect and mourn with a community.

At the height of the pandemic, there were too many requests for obituaries to assign each one. I and other obit writers tried to bear witness to a world changing calamity by writing about people of every social class, ethnicity, and profession.

A renewed commitment to diversity is the right thing to do. The popularity of the “Forgotten No More” feature in The New York Times, focusing on fascinating and influential people who never made it onto obituary pages dominated by the life stories of white men, proves this.

The pandemic emphasized the need to have professional journalists and trusted voices accurately reporting the news, offering platforms where people could turn in a time of historic isolation. It showed me the importance of strong local news organizations at a time when they are under great threat.

And it demonstrated that it’s critical to have the skill to draw out the essence of someone we’re writing about. Many of the people obituary writers speak to have never done a news interview before. English may not be their first, second, or third language.

Unless news organizations continue to invest in obituaries, the next time we have a crisis, one fundamental way of keeping people together — and informed — will be lost.

Unless news organizations continue to invest in obituaries, a fundamental way of keeping people together — and informed — will be lost.
FOOD WRITING NEEDS TO BALANCE SERVICE JOURNALISM WITH HARD NEWS

Going forward, food reporting needs to provide more robust coverage of a business undergoing historic change.

THE FIRST DEATH REPORTED FROM COVID-19 in the U.S. occurred about 30 miles from where I read about it, at the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, on the last day of Feb. 2020. I was on my way home to New Orleans from a reporting trip to the Pacific Northwest. In a few days, I would be bedridden with a fever.

I never found out if I caught the coronavirus — tests weren’t readily available at the time — though it soon became clear that I had been socializing, precociously and masklessly, in two hot spots during the initial stages of the virus’ spread. That early brush with what would soon become a consuming crisis made me realize, soon-after, that my job as a food writer for The New York Times was about to drastically change.

I had been working at The Times for less than a year when the pandemic began, and I was still adjusting to being a national correspondent after working at local newspapers for 25 years.

Suddenly, restaurants everywhere were closed, temporarily and permanently, or only partially open. Within weeks, eight million restaurant employees were out of work, according to the National Restaurant Association. Dining rooms as we knew them were potentially dangerous, for both customers and staff.

The slate of features and profiles I was set to write in the months ahead, a few of which I’d already traveled to report, pertained to a world that no longer existed. After contributing reporting to breaking news stories about restaurants closing across the country, I wrote an early pandemic piece about what I was hearing from restaurant people where I live: that this health crisis was more difficult to navigate than even Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

The story doubled as a personal reminder that I had relevant experience to draw on. In New Orleans, Katrina wasn’t just a deadly storm. If you lived in southeast Louisiana in the mid 2000s, it was an exhausting, inescapable fact of life that blocked out the sun for years. By my count at least until 2010, when all eyes turned to the BP oil spill.

But in the weeks and months after the storm, it was hard not to be frustrated by the inability to capture the enormity of the disaster with any one byline. Last spring, as I watched the food system crack, largely due to the crumbling of the dining culture I’d covered for half of my life, I thought of Katrina and took a deep breath. I reminded myself that we were going to be living this story, not just covering it — and that it wouldn’t end anytime soon.

My mantra: This is a marathon, not a sprint.

Having the luxury of working for a resource-rich news organization, where business reporters, metro reporters and fellow food journalists all worked to document our backlining food system, I looked for local stories that spoke to the national crisis: food banks in South Florida, where the harvest season comes early, struggling to meet a spike in demand while food went to waste on local farms; a beloved North Carolina chef whose obsession for corned ham could inspire housebound home cooks; a celebrated Chicago restaurant whose staff revolted over the abusive treatment of its chef-owner.

The story came in June, as the national outrage over the killing of George Floyd compelled restaurant workers across the country to speak out against pay inequities and workplace harassment and abuse that falls disproportionately on immigrants, people of color, women, and members of the LGBTQ communi-

ty. If Covid revealed, as many owners argued, that the business model for restaurants was broken, the calls for racial justice that followed the killing of George Floyd amplified the voice of restaurant workers testifying that the old model never worked for them.

I started writing about restaurants in the mid ’90s, when the job, at least as it was practiced at most mainstream publications that could pay food writers a living wage, was primarily about pleasure — service journalism for readers privileged enough to obsess over where to spend their money dining out.

Change to the field came too late, but it did come, in 2017, when the #MeToo movement brought a still-unfolding reckoning over sexual harassment and discrimination in the restaurant business.

The crises of the past year have deepened that reckoning, forcing much of the country to reexamine why inequities persist in American life. (One of the best-read stories I’ve written for The Times was about how that reexamination impacted the way Americans celebrated our last Thanksgiving.) Racial and gender imbalances have long been on display in American restaurants — in the divide, for instance, between dining room and kitchen employees, and between restaurants that traditional-

ly capture the attention of mainstream media and those that don’t.

In the years ahead, the work of food journalists will need to look a lot like it did this past year: a balance of service journalism and stories that make people feel good (we still need those), and hard news reporting about a business that is undergoing historic change and a labor force that has gone unnoticed for too long.
Sports shouldn’t be siloed off from the rest of the newsroom, diminished as the “toy department”

ONE OF THE PANDEMIC’S most significant sports moments took place before a nationally televised basketball game on Aug. 4, 2020 on black t-shirts with bold white lettering. The all-caps message: VOTEWarnock. The t-shirt designers and wearers: WNBA players.

At the time, Reverend Raphael Warnock was a little known U.S. Senate candidate in Georgia, polling a distant third in the race. The incumbent, Kelly Loeffler, was a Republican who co-owned the WNBA’s Atlanta Dream and called Black Lives Matter a movement intent on “violence and destruction across the country.”

In a letter to the WNBA commissioner, Warnock said, “The statement was prescient. In January, Warnock’s poll numbers climbed along with the WNBA’s history of social justice, an issue that took on greater importance as the pandemic wore on after months of protests against police violence.” (Image credit: GETTY IMAGES)

The national outlets enjoy a natural advantage, the push-pull between incremental coverage and deeper dives remains a fundamental, evergreen challenge for everyone.

How do sports departments and sports journalists do that? How do they balance daily, incremental coverage with more time and resource-intensive stories at the intersection of sports and society? That question concerned newsrooms pre-pandemic. Now, it’s even more critical as we plan for the next normal amid shrinking newsrooms. Even though big, well-staffed national outlets enjoy a natural advantage, the push-pull between incremental coverage and deeper dives remains a fundamental, evergreen challenge for everyone.

One solution is to make sure that sports isn’t sidelined from the rest of the newsroom, diminished as the “toy department.” Collaborations inside newsrooms should be valued as much as collaborations between newsrooms. Also, it’s incumbent on sports journalists and sports outlets to see that the social and cultural significance of sports comes in many forms and many voices, especially as sports interest fragments into smaller and smaller niches. Yes, the games and all that surrounds them matter. But so do stories that explore the intersection of sports and society, that dive into difficult subject matter and bring different perspectives to the forefront. Those stories make sports and sports coverage more meaningful, accessible and impactful.

The sports landscape will undoubtedly change again in dramatic ways, and when that happens the sports media should make time to step back, to reexamine its priorities, and recalibrate to meet future moments. We need to build that reflective, perspective-broadening muscle and exercise it regularly.

As the pandemic halted games, sports journalists turned their reporting towards causes championed by athletes, like WNBA players’ tributes to Brenna Taylor, George Floyd, and the Black Lives Matter movement.

As the world changes, sports journalism must meet the moment

When we emerge from the pandemic, sports journalism needs to keep meeting the moment. It’s the beat beyond competition-focused coverage.

The most significant sports moments took place before a nationally televised basketball game on Aug. 4, 2020 on black t-shirts with bold white lettering. The all-caps message: VOTE Warnock. The t-shirt designers and wearers: WNBA players.

The statement was prescient. In January, Warnock’s poll numbers climbed along with the WNBA’s history of social justice, an issue that took on greater importance as the pandemic wore on after months of protests against police violence. The story provides a good example of accountability journalism that connects the dots between sports, politics, power, and race. There needs to be more of that.

Meanwhile, The 19th, which describes itself as an “independent, nonprofit newsroom reporting at the intersection of gender, politics and policy,” raised important, accountability-oriented questions with its stories timed around the Tokyo Olympics. One piece asked, “How have sexual assault protocols evolved at the Olympics?” and another wondered “Will the Olympics ever truly welcome nonbinary athletes?” Another example is The New York Times’ piece on “the absence of a professional wheelchair league in the United States.” It was a good reminder of the breadth of the sports world and the communities that deserve more regular coverage.

Senate in the Democrats favor. The WNBA helped make that happen. For many sports journalists, the pandemic expanded the beat beyond competition-focused coverage. Of course, before March 2020, there were human interest features, hard news stories, and hard-hitting investigations. There were storylines that put sports in a larger context and raised awareness. Colin Kaepernick kneeling to protest police violence. The U.S. women’s national soccer team fighting for equal pay. Olympic gymnasts speaking out against sexual abuse. Gay athletes coming out during their professional careers. But the coronavirus — and the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer — brought a heightened sense of the many ways sports intertwine with the events shaping society. Sports reporters, by necessity, had to become politics, health, and culture reporters as well. That was what the moment demanded.

The shift can be explained by fewer games to cover. I filled the early days of the pandemic with breathless reports of cancellations and postponements. But when the sports world shut down and games stopped, it offered sports journalists an opportunity to step back, gain perspective, and reassess priorities. That kind of inquiry doesn’t happen easily because of the non-stop nature of sports and the coverage it generates. See five NBA games scheduled for Christmas Day. There is always something to cover. And in my experience with outlets that churn out daily coverage, there is rarely the space or time to reflect on the bigger picture, the bigger sports and society-related issues.

One of the most significant sports stories of the pandemic, sports journalism needs to keep meeting the moment. It’s the beat beyond competition-focused coverage.

The most significant sports moments took place before a nationally televised basketball game on Aug. 4, 2020 on black t-shirts with bold white lettering. The all-caps message: VOTE Warnock. The t-shirt designers and wearers: WNBA players.

The statement was prescient. In January, Warnock’s poll numbers climbed along with the WNBA’s history of social justice, an issue that took on greater importance as the pandemic wore on after months of protests against police violence. The story provides a good example of accountability journalism that connects the dots between sports, politics, power, and race. There needs to be more of that.

Meanwhile, The 19th, which describes itself as an “independent, nonprofit newsroom reporting at the intersection of gender, politics and policy,” raised important, accountability-oriented questions with its stories timed around the Tokyo Olympics. One piece asked, “How have sexual assault protocols evolved at the Olympics?” and another wondered “Will the Olympics ever truly welcome nonbinary athletes?” Another example is The New York Times’ piece on “the absence of a professional wheelchair league in the United States.” It was a good reminder of the breadth of the sports world and the communities that deserve more regular coverage.

Senate in the Democrats favor. The WNBA helped make that happen. For many sports journalists, the pandemic expanded the beat beyond competition-focused coverage. Of course, before March 2020, there were human interest features, hard news stories, and hard-hitting investigations. There were storylines that put sports in a larger context and raised awareness. Colin Kaepernick kneeling to protest police violence. The U.S. women’s national soccer team fighting for equal pay. Olympic gymnasts speaking out against sexual abuse. Gay athletes coming out during their professional careers. But the coronavirus — and the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer — brought a heightened sense of the many ways sports intertwine with the events shaping society. Sports reporters, by necessity, had to become politics, health, and culture reporters as well. That was what the moment demanded.

The shift can be explained by fewer games to cover. I filled the early days of the pandemic with breathless reports of cancellations and postponements. But when the sports world shut down and games stopped, it offered sports journalists an opportunity to step back, gain perspective, and reassess priorities. That kind of inquiry doesn’t happen easily because of the non-stop nature of sports and the coverage it generates. See five NBA games scheduled for Christmas Day. There is always something to cover. And in my experience with outlets that churn out daily coverage, there is rarely the space or time to reflect on the bigger picture, the bigger sports and society-related issues.

One of the most significant sports stories of the pandemic, sports journalism needs to keep meeting the moment. It’s the beat beyond competition-focused coverage.

The most significant sports moments took place before a nationally televised basketball game on Aug. 4, 2020 on black t-shirts with bold white lettering. The all-caps message: VOTE Warnock. The t-shirt designers and wearers: WNBA players.

The statement was prescient. In January, Warnock’s poll numbers climbed along with the WNBA’s history of social justice, an issue that took on greater importance as the pandemic wore on after months of protests against police violence. The story provides a good example of accountability journalism that connects the dots between sports, politics, power, and race. There needs to be more of that.

Meanwhile, The 19th, which describes itself as an “independent, nonprofit newsroom reporting at the intersection of gender, politics and policy,” raised important, accountability-oriented questions with its stories timed around the Tokyo Olympics. One piece asked, “How have sexual assault protocols evolved at the Olympics?” and another wondered “Will the Olympics ever truly welcome nonbinary athletes?” Another example is The New York Times’ piece on “the absence of a professional wheelchair league in the United States.” It was a good reminder of the breadth of the sports world and the communities that deserve more regular coverage.
Finding the students and families who can’t make it to school board meetings or protests needs to be a top priority for reporters

The closures began at random, like kernels bursting out of hot oil onto the kitchen stove. A high school in Snohomish County, Washington, closed abruptly after a parent tested positive. Two districts in Westchester County, New York, would close for several days after two students and a parent were possibly exposed to a novel coronavirus. Two schools in the wealthy Boston suburb of Wellesley closed abruptly after a parent tested positive.

It was the first week of March 2020. Several countries had already shuttered schools in the hopes of containing outbreaks. In the United States, by the second week of March, seven governors mandated statewide school closures. Massachusetts and others quickly followed suit.

Like many journalists, I hunkered down as the pandemic ramped up. I was one of four people covering early through higher education for WBUR, one of Boston’s public radio stations. We were inundated with incremental updates and questions from our audience to investigate, each with equal pressing importance. There weren’t enough of us or enough time to report everything. It quickly became clear the constant triage of rolling news coverage was not sustainable. This moment required a different approach — not just in terms of what we were covering but who we were covering.

As novel as the situation was, there was a familiarity to this breaking news wave. Like many others, I woke early and went to bed late, trying to make sense of what was happening and why. But we knew, as the shock waves of news stretched into days, that we couldn’t put enterprise reporting on hold for the entirety of the crisis. Our audience needed us to do more than just react to the latest press conference or policy announcement.

I couldn’t stop thinking about the myriad of services families rely on that schools provide: meals, dental care, specialists, a safe space with a caring adult. Much of that support went away almost overnight. Who could weather this upheaval? Who wouldn’t? What would make the difference for them? Was a large part of an entire generation at risk of being left behind?

We bear a lot in equity in the field of education: Who has access to opportunities, who doesn’t, and why? The pandemic acted almost as a high-contrast photo enlarging how newsrooms cover these long-standing, structural barriers that BIPOC communities and poorer Americans face. The crisis laid bare that it is not enough to attend a school committee meeting or a protest to check the pro and con boxes for your story. If education journalists are serious about covering inequity, we need to seek out the families and students that aren’t able to attend those events. Otherwise, we are only telling part of the story — the easiest one.

The pandemic made clear that we had to prioritize reaching the students who were not able to log on because of technological, economic, behavioral, or other reasons. It takes more work, but it is fundamental. And it’s a lesson we need to carry forward.

Accessing classrooms has always involved hurdles — most often the form of a public relations flap, acting as guardian of the building. Once the classroom moved to Zoom or became a packet of printouts, we all had to rely on our sources more heavily to understand what the classroom reality was. But our sources only have their reality, from their end of the screen. As every teacher knows, each student has their own needs and issues they are dealing with.

Some of the sourcing for our reporting came with little effort as so much of our work shifted online. We could get updates from press briefings and school board meetings online quickly without leaving our desks. Even protests over school closures and reopenings were livestreamed. We could churn out the news efficiently to our audience.

But that efficiency came with a price. In that fast pace, most people we ended up speaking with had reliable internet. Participants logged into a public meeting were able to work from home or had schedules flexible enough to accommodate Zoom meetings. According to the most recent federal data, 14% of children nationwide did not have internet service at home. Districts rolled out hotspots, and some students drove to school or college parking lots in order to complete their work. Many students were not logging on at all. I worried we could start reporting from a delusion: thinking we had unprecedented access when we were actually on the sidelines.

The key is being out in the field, connecting with students in their homes or hang-out spots. The most stand-out reporting from this period was accountability journalism with a narrative heartbeat. Take, for example, Samantha Shapiro’s powerful reporting on homeless students for The New York Times Magazine. She spoke with more than a dozen families to understand the way the system is set up and what a strain that is for families. The Boston Globe sent journalists to school meal pickup sites and bus stops at the beginning of the pandemic to understand and follow what the disruptions meant for some families. That kind of engagement should continue. Smaller newsrooms should prioritize that relationship-building journalism as a core tenet of how they cover their communities.

No one was untouched by the pandemic. But it was not a singular experience. Some of us have lost loved ones, others don’t have a single close family member or friend who became ill. Some of us discovered the joy of pickleball or pickling jars, while others were crushed by the avalanche of responsibilities on our shoulders. Some teachers discovered new techniques and perspectives, others have been wrung dry. Some students learned more independence and confidence or took on new projects and activism, others have back-slid on the many hard won progressions. Each of these is over-simplified dichotomies. There are so many more gradations.

We have an obligation to the communities we report on to prioritize deep listening and engagement, to report deeply and fully, and to embrace the nuance of their experiences.
China probably represented about 500 undetected infections. He thought there were 15 cases outside of China, but I said, ‘No, it’s up to 29 cases now.’ He became audibly flustered. ‘If it’s not contained shortly, I think we are looking at a pandemic,’ he told me. I emailed my editor when I got off that call and said, ‘I think I just had the most frightening interview of my life.’ I would say, then, I knew.

These days, if you are a health or medical reporter, your job has somewhat morphed into being a political reporter as well. What has that shift meant?

One of the big, big things about this story has been how political it’s been, and it’s frankly, something that I hadn’t anticipated. I can’t think of another disease outbreak that I covered that has been as political. Measles outbreaks can have political elements — sometimes — there’s the anti-vaccine crowd and how they try to exert pressure. There’s the question of what public health departments are willing to do to enforce mandates. That’s often quite political, but it’s nowhere near as political as this event has been. The Trump administration’s approach of downplaying the threat because it didn’t fit into the narrative they wanted to tell going into the election was just really astonishing, and the country is still paying for it. The fact that people can disbelieve objective truth — because somebody told them, that’s not white, it’s black — is an enormous challenge.

How have you dealt with the increasing politicization of your beat?

In the day-to-day of my work, I just report on and write the stories that I think are important and that my editors think are important. The fact that some portion of the public would disbelieve them, I can’t factor that into the decisions about what I write or how I write. Not reading the comments or engaging on social media also helps. Before the pandemic, I enjoyed Twitter a lot more than I do now.

Science evolves, which presents challenges when trying to explain complex issues that unfold in a non-linear fashion. How do you convey that to an audience, especially one that’s so polarized?

The public is getting a lesson in real time about science and how messy it can be. Nobody — neither journalists nor the science community — does a very good job explaining to people the process. We need to do better in saying, ‘This is the best information that we have today, but tomorrow we will have more information and it might change our view of things.’

People lambasted the CDC and Tony Fauci, for instance, for initially saying there was no science to support the public wearing masks. If you remember back to March and April of last year, the government was urging people not to wear cloth masks, but the CDC changed its advice. That was sold as an error, like ‘You got it wrong, why should we believe you about masks?’ If you got that wrong, why should we trust you about vaccines?”

That was useful for the politicians who wanted to downplay the significance of the pandemic, but it hasn’t really helped the public at all. It’s difficult to explain to people that the science could change, but we have to be clear that it’s not us backtracking. It’s us finding out more stuff. When you put it that way, I think most people would find it intuitive.

Where does that narrative come from? Are the politicians setting the agenda and the press following suit? Do or journalists need a better vocabulary to explain these issues?

It’s a mix of the two. It’s definitely in the interest of the politician to frame changing advice as evidence of incompetence. But I also think in general there’s a temptation not to put as many caveats into a story as the story might need because, if you do, it can feel like you are undermining the story. This isn’t so much about vocabulary as it is about choices. I’ve become even more convinced that writing about individual studies as they emerge is part of the problem. Very few studies offer a definitive answer. They add something to our understanding of things by building on what’s been known before or by contradicting what’s been known before. There are some exceptions, but every time somebody reads a headline that’s about one particular study, there’s the possibility that they see that as the entire answer, and it rarely is. Different outlets have different demands of their reporters and different standards, but I think in general feeding your readers or listeners or viewers simple answers to complex questions is not helping them.

What lessons did the pandemic teach you so far that you’ll carry forward in your work?

Get more sleep! I’ve also diversified my source base substantially. When you find people that you trust, that are really knowledgeable and will always answer your call, there’s the temptation to go back to them over and over again. It’s been really useful in this pandemic to find new voices and include those in the coverage. That’s something that I will continue to work at going forward.
Every Tuesday and Thursday, back around 2002, I would take my little one to work in my car, snug in warm clothes and tucked into a covered car seat. Only his little face would be showing as I'd snap the seat out of its base after arriving at the Myrtle Beach headquarters of the Myrtle Beach News and Sun News, the area's largest homebuilder, for an early morning interview with the CEO.

Or my son and I would show up at a construction site or meet developers on a plot of land where trees had recently been clear cut or at a model home. I can't remember precisely, but Kyle was about one year old, give or take a few months.

Not once did he cry during any of our trips or as I waited in the lobby of the area's largest homebuilder for the CEO to answer the phone himself or be moseyed by the secretary would be preoccupied with other things, and the CEO would answer the phone himself or be moseyed by the secretary. That juggling forced me to learn the rhythm of the Myrtle Beach area's business community better. I figured out when it would be easiest to catch a CEO directly — often between 8 a.m. and 8:30 a.m., when the secretary would be preoccupied with other things, and the CEO would answer the phone himself or be moseyed through the lobby alone — an insight I used even after those days of dragging Kyle to interviews had ended. This was in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks, when newsrooms throughout the country had begun beefing up security measures and rethinking how journalists did their jobs in response to an unprecedented event. I never did tell my editors about juggling my family responsibilities that way because I felt guilty, as though I had done something wrong, broken some unspoken code.

Getting my job done well wasn't enough. I had to get it done well in a particular way, a traditional one even though I had proven that tradition and excellence weren't always the same.

I'm reminded of that period of my career now because in the coming months, many journalists and most newsrooms will be facing something similar — trying to figure out what to do in the aftermath of a once-in-a-century pandemic that upended everything.

Should the doors to the downtown offices be flung open and everyone expected to saunter back in like a family of fluffy ants?

Or should remote work remain the norm? For me, how we end up answering such questions isn't as important as why.

For all the harm Covid-19 has caused — and the harm has been immense — it forced us to rethink everything. I'm hoping in the coming months, everything we do will still be under intense examination. I imagine had we been regularly working via Zoom when I was taking Kyle to interviews, I would not have felt the need to hide my struggles with juggling family and work responsibilities.

During Covid, we saw kids and pets sahavy in the background of live TV interviews and found it cute, not disconcerting. As long as the journalist got the job done well, no one complained. It was understood that a journalist wasn't just a journalist but also a father or mother or husband or wife or boyfriend or girlfriend or cat sitter or dog lover or someone who wore pajamas and slippers, too.

We got to know journalists beyond the byline or made-up face on the screen, sometimes in ways that impressed us, sometimes in ways that depressed us. It was sometimes inspiring, sometimes messy. In short, it was … real. Journalists were less packaged.

Going forward, I hope newsrooms find a way to continue cultivating that new norm rather than feeling the need to re-establish the pre-Covid norm of having a kind of wall between the personal and professional; we all know real life has always been messier than that. Let's face it. Being a journalist has become a 24/7 job. We are on all the time, even when we aren't chasing a lead or scanning court documents to verify a fact for an investigative report. I don't think that's going to change. It doesn't have to. It's hard to turn your brain off from the news, whether or not you're in your local community as you hit the locals' favorite for lunch or as you scroll your Twitter timeline. But in order to make that work, to ensure a healthier industry filled with healthier people, the whole of the journalist must be taken into account in ways that weren't true pre-Covid.

Newsroom leaders need to recognize that almost on a dime we were able to transform how we did our jobs — because we had to. More forthrightly recognizing and dealing with the stress this job can have on our mental health has been a major step forward. There seems to be a tendency to force everyone to grit and bear whatever they face and more of an acknowledgement that we must think outside of traditional expectations. I suspect that when the doors of newsrooms are flung open, there's reason to believe we won't soon forget what we learned about the necessity of greater diversity.

My hope is that the industry will carry those lessons forward so that today's young journalists won't feel guilty juggling their duties as parents like I did.

I'm hoping in the coming months, everything we do will still be under intense examination. I imagine had we been regularly working via Zoom when I was taking Kyle to interviews, I would not have felt the need to hide my struggles with juggling family and work responsibilities.

During Covid, we saw kids and pets sahavy in the background of live TV interviews and found it cute, not disconcerting. As long as the journalist got the job done well, no one complained. It was understood that a journalist wasn't just a journalist but also a father or mother or husband or wife or boyfriend or girlfriend or cat sitter or dog lover or someone who wore pajamas and slippers, too.

We got to know journalists beyond the byline or made-up face on the screen, sometimes in ways that impressed us, sometimes in ways that depressed us. It was sometimes inspiring, sometimes messy. In short, it was … real. Journalists were less packaged.

Going forward, I hope newsrooms find a way to continue cultivating that new norm rather than feeling the need to re-establish the pre-Covid norm of having a kind of wall between the personal and professional; we all know real life has always been messier than that. Let's face it. Being a journalist has become a 24/7 job. We are on all the time, even when we aren't chasing a lead or scanning court documents to verify a fact for an investigative report. I don't think that's going to change.

It doesn't have to. It's hard to turn your brain off from the news, whether or not you're in your local community as you hit the locals' favorite for lunch or as you scroll your Twitter timeline. But in order to make that work, to ensure a healthier industry filled with healthier people, the whole of the journalist must be taken into account in ways that weren't true pre-Covid.

Newsroom leaders need to recognize that almost on a dime we were able to transform how we did our jobs — because we had to. More forthrightly recognizing and dealing with the stress this job can have on our mental health has been a major step forward. There seems to be a tendency to force everyone to grit and bear whatever they face and more of an acknowledgement that we must think outside of traditional expectations. I suspect that when the doors of newsrooms are flung wide open, greater attempts to foster the comradery that we must think outside of traditional expectations.

My hope is that the industry will carry those lessons forward so that today's young journalists won't feel guilty juggling their duties as parents like I did.
ALEXEI NAVALNY, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND THE STATE OF THE FREE PRESS IN RUSSIA

The space for independent Russian journalism is shrinking, but a handful of small outlets still attempt to offer an alternative to state media.

By Elizaveta Kuznetsova
ON THE MORNING OF APRIL 29, Russian opposition leader and blogger Alexei Navalny appeared in court via video link, fighting the second in a series of legal charges filed against him since the beginning of the year. His appearance was skeletal, having just ended a 24-day hunger strike to demand adequate medical care during his imprisonment in Penal Colony No. Two (IK-2) outside Moscow, one of Russia’s harshest correctional facilities.

Upon his return to Russia in January, after recovering abroad from an assassination attempt involving Novichok poisoning, Navalny was detained and prosecuted in a hastily organized court proceeding at a local police station. Accusing him of failure to report regularly to the police while he was in a coma in Germany, the police court jailed him for 30 days in the lead up to a February trial that resulted in a prison sentence of more than two years. A joint investigation by the Russian independent online newspaper The Insider, Bellingcat, CNN, and Der Spiegel linked the Novichok poisoning to Russia’s Federal Security Service (FSB).

Following the sentencing, protests in support of Navalny swept the country, resulting in mass arrests unprecedented in modern-day Russia. In January and February, Russian authorities detained up to 159 journalists covering the demonstrations, according to the Glasnost Defense Foundation, a nonprofit that helps protect journalists in Russia. But on that late April morning, Navalny was appealing another charge — insulting a World War II veteran, 94-year-old Ignat Arremenko.

Arremenko had been featured in a promotional video produced by the Russian state-run television network RT that aired in June 2020. In it, he, together with other prominent Russian personalities, encouraged viewers to vote for amendments to the constitution. Among other things, these changes would reset the clock on President Putin’s term limits, enabling him to hold the office twice more. They were approved the next month in a contested referendum.

In weekly YouTube live streams Navalny hosted until the Novichok attack, he repeatedly pointed out that the amendments had already been approved in a legal procedure outlined in the Russian constitution. In his view, the vote was a propaganda stunt to increase popular support for a decision that had already been made. Navalny criticized a number of famous actors who appeared in pro-amendment agitprop — the Soviet word for propaganda materials — in his broadcasts and on Twitter, calling them “traitors.” The statement prompted a campaign in support of the veteran, expanding from Navalny’s followers as a serious threat. Social media has opened up avenues for independent journalism, providing a small but growing alternative to federal networks. While Navalny and his Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK) as well as independent news outlets use platforms like YouTube to disseminate investigative reporting, social media is increasingly rife with state-sponsored propaganda.

“There is a large, patriotic, conservative part and a small, proud, liberal opposition, but there is almost nothing in between,” says Russian independent journalist and media analyst Anna Kachkaeva of the Russian media landscape.

Yet Navalny’s success in reaching a large audience is emblematic of a new type of media consumer in Russia, and a Moscow court’s designation of his movement as “extremist” suggests the Kremlin sees Navalny and his followers as a serious threat. Social media has opened up avenues for independent journalism, providing a small but growing alternative to federal networks such as VGTRK (the All-Russian State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company), Channel One, or RT, and meeting a demand for truthful reporting.

According to the Levada-Center, only 16% of Russians trust official government information on the Covid-19 pandemic, for example. “We saw a surge in audience last spring when we released an infographic on the coronavirus in Russia,” says Sergey Smirnov, editor in chief of the independent news outlet MediaZona, founded in 2014 by Maria Alyokhina and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, members of the Russian punk rock band Pussy Riot.

Over the last 20 years, the space for independent journalism in Russia has shrunk significantly, due to financial pressure, state media acquisitions, and assaults on journalists. Most outlets are either controlled by the government or have been sold to pro-Kremlin businessmen. Those resistant to state pressure are confronted with oppressive information laws. These policies not only target individual journalists but also international tech giants. In April, a Moscow court fined Twitter for its refusal to delete content encouraging the Russian public to take to the streets in support of Navalny. Facebook and Google are facing similar penalties.

The pressure on political opposition and independent press has intensified. Russia’s Justice Ministry declared Latvia-based Meduza, one of the most popular online news outlets, a “foreign agent,” discrediting its operations and leading to severe financial losses. VTimes, an independent online business newspaper, recently stopped operations out of fear of prosecution after the outlet was added to that same list of “foreign media amplifies the divide. Some 42% of respondents to a February survey by the Levada-Center, a Russian independent polling organization, said they got their news through social networks. While Navalny and his Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK) as well as independent news outlets use platforms like YouTube to disseminate investigations, social media is also increasingly rife with state-sponsored propaganda.

“There is a large, patriotic, conservative part and a small, proud, liberal opposition, but there is almost nothing in between,” says Russian independent journalist and media analyst Anna Kachkaeva of the Russian media landscape.

Yet Navalny’s success in reaching a large audience is emblematic of a new type of media consumer in Russia, and a Moscow court’s designation of his movement as “extremist” suggests the Kremlin sees Navalny and his followers as a serious threat. Social media has opened up avenues for independent journalism, providing a small but growing alternative to federal networks such as VGTRK (the All-Russian State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company), Channel One, or RT, and meeting a demand for truthful reporting.

According to the Levada-Center, only 16% of Russians trust official government information on the Covid-19 pandemic, for example.

“We saw a surge in audience last spring when we released an infographic on the coronavirus in Russia,” says Sergey Smirnov, editor in chief of the independent news outlet MediaZona, founded in 2014 by Maria Alyokhina and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, members of the Russian punk rock band Pussy Riot.

Over the last 20 years, the space for independent journalism in Russia has shrunk significantly, due to financial pressure, state media acquisitions, and assaults on journalists. Most outlets are either controlled by the government or have been sold to pro-Kremlin businessmen. Those resistant to state pressure are confronted with oppressive information laws. These policies not only target individual journalists but also international tech giants. In April, a Moscow court fined Twitter for its refusal to delete content encouraging the Russian public to take to the streets in support of Navalny. Facebook and Google are facing similar penalties.

The pressure on political opposition and independent press has intensified. Russia’s Justice Ministry declared Latvia-based Meduza, one of the most popular online news outlets, a “foreign agent,” discrediting its operations and leading to severe financial losses. VTimes, an independent online business newspaper, recently stopped operations out of fear of prosecution after the outlet was added to that same list of “foreign

Upon his return to Russia in January, after recovering abroad from an assassination attempt involving Novichok poisoning, Navalny was detained and prosecuted in a hastily organized court proceeding at a local police station. Accusing him of failure to report regularly to the police while he was in a coma in Germany, the court jailed him for 30 days in the lead up to a February trial that resulted in a prison sentence of more than two years. A joint investigation by the Russian independent online newspaper The Insider, Bellingcat, CNN, and Der Spiegel linked the Novichok poisoning to Russia’s Federal Security Service (FSB).

Following the sentencing, protests in support of Navalny swept the country, resulting in mass arrests unprecedented in modern-day Russia. In January and February, Russian authorities detained up to 159 journalists covering the demonstrations, according to the Glasnost Defense Foundation, a nonprofit that helps protect journalists in Russia. But on that late April morning, Navalny was appealing another charge — insulting a World War II veteran, 94-year-old Ignat Arremenko.

Arremenko had been featured in a promotional video produced by the Russian state-run television network RT that aired in June 2020. In it, he, together with other prominent Russian personalities, encouraged viewers to vote for amendments to the constitution. Among other things, these changes would reset the clock on President Putin’s term limits, enabling him to hold the office twice more. They were approved the next month in a contested referendum.

In weekly YouTube live streams Navalny hosted until the Novichok attack, he repeatedly pointed out that the amendments had already been approved in a legal procedure outlined in the Russian constitution. In his view, the vote was a propaganda stunt to increase popular support for a decision that had already been made. Navalny criticized a number of famous actors who appeared in pro-amendment agitprop — the Soviet word for propaganda materials — in his broadcasts and on Twitter, calling them “traitors.” The statement prompted a campaign in support of the veteran, expanding from Navalny’s followers as a serious threat. Social media has opened up avenues for independent journalism, providing a small but growing alternative to federal networks such as VGTRK (the All-Russian State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company), Channel One, or RT, and meeting a demand for truthful reporting.

According to the Levada-Center, only 16% of Russians trust official government information on the Covid-19 pandemic, for example.

“We saw a surge in audience last spring when we released an infographic on the coronavirus in Russia,” says Sergey Smirnov, editor in chief of the independent news outlet MediaZona, founded in 2014 by Maria Alyokhina and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, members of the Russian punk rock band Pussy Riot.

Over the last 20 years, the space for independent journalism in Russia has shrunk significantly, due to financial pressure, state media acquisitions, and assaults on journalists. Most outlets are either controlled by the government or have been sold to pro-Kremlin businessmen. Those resistant to state pressure are confronted with oppressive information laws. These policies not only target individual journalists but also international tech giants. In April, a Moscow court fined Twitter for its refusal to delete content encouraging the Russian public to take to the streets in support of Navalny. Facebook and Google are facing similar penalties.

The pressure on political opposition and independent press has intensified. Russia’s Justice Ministry declared Latvia-based Meduza, one of the most popular online news outlets, a “foreign agent,” discrediting its operations and leading to severe financial losses. VTimes, an independent online business newspaper, recently stopped operations out of fear of prosecution after the outlet was added to that same list of “foreign
“We have been practically called ‘enemies of the state.’ What speakers, sources, or experts would want to talk to such a media outlet? Journalism is not a crime.”

Ivan Kolpakov, Editor-in-Chief, Meduza

MediaZona’s original focus was on the criminal justice system, a cause embraced by Pussy Riot’s Alyokhina and Tolokonnikova. Independent Russian newsrooms often emerge as niche outlets directly from their founders’ activism.

“It’s startling for many Western journalists to see this ‘career trajectory’ that is quite standard in Russia,” says Aric Toler, a researcher at Bellatag that focuses on emerging erosion to Eastern Europe. In the 19th and 20th centuries, Russian political commentators and philosophers found creative ways to circumvent censorship.

“Now journalists stand in a position somewhat similar to that in the intellectual history of Russia,” Toler adds.

Navalny and the FBK straddle a similar line between activism and journalism. Over the last few years, Navalny and his team have used journalistic techniques to expose corruption within the Russian government. Although Navalny’s work is politically motivated, the FBK has filled a gap created by the crackdown against independent newsrooms.

That crackdown has left only a handful of traditional media outlets able to preserve editorial independence.

Eliho Moskvy, which started as a small radio station in the 1990s and is now partly controlled by the Russian government, remains openly critical. Unlike news in independent websites, Echo Moskvy is not only popular among younger people but is also one of the most reputable sources of information for broader audiences.

According to editor-in-chief Aleksei Venediktov, the reason the radio station still exists is that the Russian government itself needs at least one reliable source of information to stay in the loop if what is actually happening in the country.

Many young Russian journalists who choose to work independently start their careers at Echo Moskvy or Novaya Gazeta, a newspaper famous for its investigative journalism and whose reporters have been repeatedly attacked and sometimes murdered since its founding in 1993.

Among online independent media, some outlets, like Meduza, have determined the only way to work is outside Russia. During the pandemic, the site has provided in-depth coverage, often exposing flaws in official death toll statistics. But its designation as a “foreign agent” has already led to the loss of most of its advertisers.

The law’s primary goal is to stigmatize and marginalize targeted outlets. Prior to Meduza, Russia had applied the same law to American outlets like Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Voice of America in what was considered a response to the U.S. Justice Department ordering RT to register as a foreign agent.

Meduza is now required to inform readers — in the form of a label on each post, in advertising, and on its sites — that the site distributes information as a foreign agent.

“We have been practically called ‘enemies of the state,’” says Meduza’s editor-in-chief, Ivan Kolpakov. “What speakers, sources, or experts would want to talk to such a media outlet? Journalism is not a crime.” The site has now turned to crowdfunding to continue operating.

Increasingly, smaller, semi-offline channels like Meduza, have determined the only way to work is outside Russia. During the pandemic, the site has provided in-depth coverage, often exposing flaws in official death toll statistics. But its designation as a “foreign agent” has already led to the loss of most of its advertisers.

The law’s primary goal is to stigmatize and marginalize targeted outlets. Prior to Meduza, Russia had applied the same law to American outlets like Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Voice of America in what was considered a response to the U.S. Justice Department ordering RT to register as a foreign agent.

Meduza is now required to inform readers — in the form of a label on each post, in advertising, and on its sites — that the site distributes information as a foreign agent.

“We have been practically called ‘enemies of the state,’” says Meduza’s editor-in-chief, Ivan Kolpakov. “What speakers, sources, or experts would want to talk to such a media outlet? Journalism is not a crime.” The site has now turned to crowdfunding to continue operating.

Increasingly, smaller, semi-offline channels like Meduza, have determined the only way to work is outside Russia. During the pandemic, the site has provided in-depth coverage, often exposing flaws in official death toll statistics. But its designation as a “foreign agent” has already led to the loss of most of its advertisers.

The law’s primary goal is to stigmatize and marginalize targeted outlets. Prior to Meduza, Russia had applied the same law to American outlets like Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Voice of America in what was considered a response to the U.S. Justice Department ordering RT to register as a foreign agent.

Meduza is now required to inform readers — in the form of a label on each post, in advertising, and on its sites — that the site distributes information as a foreign agent.

“We have been practically called ‘enemies of the state,’” says Meduza’s editor-in-chief, Ivan Kolpakov. “What speakers, sources, or experts would want to talk to such a media outlet? Journalism is not a crime.” The site has now turned to crowdfunding to continue operating.

Increasingly, smaller, semi-offline channels like Meduza, have determined the only way to work is outside Russia. During the pandemic, the site has provided in-depth coverage, often exposing flaws in official death toll statistics. But its designation as a “foreign agent” has already led to the loss of most of its advertisers.

The law’s primary goal is to stigmatize and marginalize targeted outlets. Prior to Meduza, Russia had applied the same law to American outlets like Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Voice of America in what was considered a response to the U.S. Justice Department ordering RT to register as a foreign agent.

Meduza is now required to inform readers — in the form of a label on each post, in advertising, and on its sites — that the site distributes information as a foreign agent.

“We have been practically called ‘enemies of the state,’” says Meduza’s editor-in-chief, Ivan Kolpakov. “What speakers, sources, or experts would want to talk to such a media outlet? Journalism is not a crime.” The site has now turned to crowdfunding to continue operating.

Increasingly, smaller, semi-offline channels like Meduza, have determined the only way to work is outside Russia. During the pandemic, the site has provided in-depth coverage, often exposing flaws in official death toll statistics. But its designation as a “foreign agent” has already led to the loss of most of its advertisers.

The law’s primary goal is to stigmatize and marginalize targeted outlets. Prior to Meduza, Russia had applied the same law to American outlets like Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Voice of America in what was considered a response to the U.S. Justice Department ordering RT to register as a foreign agent.

Meduza is now required to inform readers — in the form of a label on each post, in advertising, and on its sites — that the site distributes information as a foreign agent.
AN UNFAIR ADVANTAGE?

IN LITHUANIA, COMMERCIAL STATIONS ARGUE STATE-FINANCED BUDGETS FOR THE COUNTRY’S PUBLIC BROADCASTER CREATE A SKEWED COMPETITIVE LANDSCAPE BY ANN COOPER

When the Soviet army moved to crush a powerful pro-independence movement in its republic of Lithuania in 1991, the military’s list of targets included Lithuania’s broadcast studios and TV transmission tower, which for months had defiantly sent out news free of Soviet censorship.

The bloodiest attack came when tanks rumbled up the TV tower hill in Vilnius, capital of the then-Soviet republic. Hundreds of unarmed civilians stood ground there, using their bodies to protect the besieged republic’s most potent symbol of free speech.

Thirty years later, the TV tower hosts a small museum memorializing the 14 people who died defending the structure. And the broadcast studios, where Soviet soldiers once battered down doors to silence the calls for independence, now house the country’s public broadcaster, Lithuanian National Radio and Television (LRT).

A group of Lithuanians block a Russian tank outside of the LRT studios in Vilnius two days prior to an attack by Russian forces in January 1991.
The 30th anniversary of the Soviet army attack was widely commemorated on Jan. 13, with videos, slide shows, and “I remember” features published through- out the public and private media that to- day serve Lithuania’s 2.8 million people. The independent accountability report- ing they provide is a little-noticed post- Cold War success, enabled by a press freedom climate ranked higher than the U.K., France, or the U.S. The Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index puts Lithuania 28th out of 180 countries; of the 15 former Soviet re- publics, only fellow Baltic states Estonia and Latvia rate higher.

But in those broadcast studios once targeted by the Soviet military, journalists are under attack again. This time it’s not tanks, or soldiers, or even politicians leading the charge. Instead, it’s LRT’s commercial com- petitors, who have cried “unfair” in a formal complaint asking for a European Union order to curb the public broadcaster’s state-financed budget and online operation. Public funding of broadcasting is a cherished corner- stone of European democracies. Across the continent, public radio and TV enjoyed government-approved mo- nopolies on the airwaves for decades, in exchange for fulfilling mandates like the BBC’s — to “inform, educate, and entertain.” Even after commercial competitors were allowed in the 1980s, European governments have con- tinued to collect special fees or grant government funds for public media, citing goals of promoting civil discourse, national unity and independence, trustworthy reporting.

But in this digital age, commercial competitors to the BBC and publicly funded outlets in Germany, Ireland, Finland, and elsewhere have demanded a European re-

think, in particular challenging public media expansions in online news. Lithuania, which joined the EU in 2004, entered that debate last June, when several leading com- mercial media outlets filed a 46-page complaint with the EU’s executive arm, the European Commission.

Their complaint argues that the pandemic has firm- ly underscored the need for change. Ad revenue losses of 50% or more, due to Covid economics, forced many commercial newsrooms to furlough journalists or use pay cuts or layoffs to stay afloat. While those newsrooms tightened belts, the pan- demic’s financial turmoil didn’t touch LRT or its three TV channels, three radio stations, and online news sites in Lithuanian, Russian, and English. LRT is funded by fixed percentages of personal income and excise tax revenues, a formula designed by lawmakers to provide more-generous (and pandemic-proof) annual budgets: an 11% increase in 2020 was followed by another rise of 9%, totaling around 864 million, to fund LRT this year.

“They did not have to think how to survive [the pandemic] and how, for example, to cut the wages of journalists,” says Džina Donauskaitė, director of the nonprofit Lithuanian Journalism Centre, which works

with both public and private media. Instead, LRT could create new pandemic-era programming, such as educa- tional shows for children in virus lockdown and Sunday worship services on TV, after Covid forced church clo- sures in the very Catholic country. This year’s budget increase will help LRT open a bureau in Brussels to cov- er the EU, a rare foreign venture for Lithuanian media.

LRT “is having something of a golden moment” says Ruslana Traiškienė, who edits the English version of 15min, Lithuania’s second most widely read news por- tal. The public broadcaster’s director general, Motika Garbačiauskaitė-Budriénė, who came to LRT after years as editor of Lithuania’s number one portal, Delfi, “has done a fantastic job with online,” Traiškienė notes. “Overall, maybe she’s doing too good a job,” he says. “There has to be some kind of balance.”

“Balance” is a mantra repeated frequently by com- mercial rivals, who warn that if LRT becomes too dominant, the relatively rich selection of journalism in this small country — from traditional broadcast news and digital-first sites to nonprofit longform story- telling and YouTube news channels — will wither away. That may be particularly alarming for those who remem- ber the Soviet era, when there was no media competition, only the censored propaganda of the Communist Party.

Soviet Lithuania’s brief defiance of that censorship re- gime led to the 1991 attack on its TV tower, but less than a year later the Soviet Union collapsed. Suddently Lithuania and the other Soviet republics were independent coun- tries, free to build new, uncensored media systems.

After decades of Soviet rule, though, there were no traditions of ethical journalism and few legitimate revenue sources. A kind of “wild capitalism” ruled Lithuania’s post-Soviet media market, says journalist Rolandas Barysas, who covered the early years of inde- pendence for Reuters. A common practice was to run “news” stories paid for by businessmen or politicians. Blackmail was another technique for raising revenues: “Buy ads with us, or we’ll print something scurrilous about you.” In 2007, citing the continuing shakedown prac- tices in some newsrooms, POLITICO Europe pro- claimed “Lithuanian newspapers in need of a make
CEO Vytautas Benokraitis, who was Garbačiauskaitė-Budrienė’s boss when she was editor in chief at Delfi. Benokraitis, who made a losing bid for the Euroleague season, argues that such popular, commercially lucrative programming doesn’t belong on a channel that’s funded by taxpayers. “Why should the state invest in a product that will be fully covered by a commercial player?” he asks.

That’s one of the arguments made in the commercial media complaint to the European Commission. Any decision could be years away, and any EC call for change would still require action by Lithuania’s government.

One of Garbačiauskaitė-Budrienė’s actions has been to create a repository for that broadcast work. “Content must reach the user through the most convenient channel,” she says.

At the time, LRT’s online presence barely registered in audience surveys. Three years on, it now regularly ranks as Lithuania’s fifth-most visited news portal — thanks to more frequent news updates, mobile push notifications, and new, digital-only content, like a documentary series that has tackled sensitive topics such as gay parenting and abortion.

Garbačiauskaitė-Budrienė sees these changes as essential, if LRT is to be relevant for younger audiences. “We live in the 21st century, and there are no more boundaries between different media platforms,” she said in an early interview with her old employer, Verslo žinios.

She’s also shifted the complaints that were once part to its growing online video programming and its pioneering paywall for premium content, according to company CEO Benokraitis. The competition for those digital audiences is fierce, and Garbačiauskaitė-Budrienė’s former newsroom, Delfi, is still winning it, with an editorial mix described by The Fix, a European media review, as “a supermarket.

Some of Delfi’s recent serious journalism included a deep-dive investigation of Russian disinformation and an exposé of an election fraud operation run from a Lithuanian prison. Covid updates dominate the home page, though they bump up against other features beg- ging for clicks; on one late January day, the clickbait in- cluded horoscopes, a guide to cleaning your toilet, and an article speculating that actress Demi Moore’s new life was caused by a bad face lift.

Clickbait is a common target of Delfi reader complaints, as is the virtue posted anonymously in some comment sections. But as it celebrates its 25th anniversary this year, Delfi remains an innovator. It’s a party to the complaint against LRT, but the company managed to avoid pandemic-related staff cuts last year thanks in part to its growing online video programming and its pioneering paywall for premium content, according to company CEO Benokraitis.

Delfi’s online rival, 15min, very publicly elimin- ated anonymous comments a few years ago in an “internet hygiene” campaign. 15min has also sought to distinguish itself by emphasizing political analysis and investigative reporting, like its work uncovering alleged corrupt ties be- tween Lithuanian business corridors. For its Baltic public broadcaster can only post election opinion polls online if the results have already been discussed on its radio or TV channels, while German and Austrian public media can put their sports videos online for no more than 24 hours. (Cultural programming can stay posted indefinitely.)

Such piecemeal restrictions don’t really satisfy the fundamental complaint of Lithuania’s commercial me- dia: that the public broadcaster should focus on audio and video, using online and mobile platforms largely as a repository for that broadcast work.

From the day she arrived at LRT in 2018, Garbačiauskaitė-Budrienė has rejected that as an outdated view.

“We live in the 21st century, and there are no more boundaries between different media platforms,” she said in an early interview with her old employer, Verslo žinios. “Content must reach the user through the most convenient channel.”

At the time, LRT’s online presence barely registered in audience surveys. Three years on, it now regularly ranks as Lithuania’s fifth-most visited news portal — thanks to more frequent news updates, mobile push notifications, and new, digital-only content, like a documentary series that has tackled sensitive topics such as gay parenting and abortion.

Garbačiauskaitė-Budrienė sees these changes as essential, if LRT is to be relevant for younger audiences. “We live in the 21st century, and there are no more boundaries between different media platforms,” she says.

Even commercial media critics say LRT’s journalism has remained strong under Garbačiauskaitė-Budrienė, who has used her budget and staff — the largest in Lithuanian media — to mount ambitious coverage of major events, such as national elections and Pope Francis’s 2018 visit to Lithuania.

But commercial rivals balked when that budget en- abled LRT to win air rights for this season’s Euroleague basketball games. In the past, the games aired behind a paywall on commercial TV; LRT is now showing many of them for free (but selling sponsorships, similar to PBS underwriting, which further incensed commercial rivals).

Basketball is a religion here in Lithuania,” says Delfi

WE LIVE IN THE 21ST CENTURY, AND THERE ARE NO MORE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN DIFFERENT MEDIA PLATFORMS

Monika Garbačiauskaitė-Budrienė, LRT

to lead the far more popular online market for news.

Three years ago, Garbačiauskaitė-Budrienė moved from commercial media to LRT. As leader of the public broadcaster, she moved swiftly to create an investiga- tive reporting desk and to fend off political challenges to LRT’s independence. (A new management board pro- posed by populist government leaders in 2019 was not pos- ed to its growing online video programming and its pioneering paywall for premium content, according to
distinguished her, she says. “Your news is here.”

In comparison for those digital audiences is fierce, and Garbačiauskaitė-Budrienė’s former newsroom, Delfi, is still winning it, with an editorial mix described by The Fix, a European media review, as “a supermarket.

Some of Delfi’s recent serious journalism included a deep-dive investigation of Russian disinformation and an exposé of an election fraud operation run from a Lithuanian prison. Covid updates dominate the home page, though they bump up against other features beg- ging for clicks; on one late January day, the clickbait in- cluded horoscopes, a guide to cleaning your toilet, and an article speculating that actress Demi Moore’s new life was caused by a bad face lift.

Clickbait is a common target of Delfi reader complaints, as is the virtue posted anonymously in some comment sections. But as it celebrates its 25th anniversary this year, Delfi remains an innovator. It’s a party to the complaint against LRT, but the company managed to avoid pandemic-related staff cuts last year thanks in part to its growing online video programming and its pioneering paywall for premium content, according to company CEO Benokraitis.

Delfi’s online rival, 15min, very publicly elimin- ated anonymous comments a few years ago in an “internet hygiene” campaign. 15min has also sought to distinguish itself by emphasizing political analysis and investigative reporting, like its work uncovering alleged corrupt ties be- tween Lithuanian business corridors. For its Baltic

Delfi, Lithuania’s number one portal, has built a robust mix of news and features, including an investigative series on Andrius Kuprevičius, who was charged on multiple counts of fraud.

That loss leaves LRT as the only major newsroom with a full-time investigative staff — and with the budget to withstand legal challenges to its investigations, says Donauskaite, the director of the Lithuanian Journalism Centre. “You have to have more resources allocated for that,” she says, noting that LRT is still in independent news media, “a statement welcomed by journalists.

That’s great, says Ruslanas Irikėvicius, the editor at 15min English. But “You never know what might happen in the next election.”

Delfi, Lithuania’s number one portal, has built a robust mix of news and features, including an investigative series on Andrius Kuprevičius, who was charged on multiple counts of fraud.

That loss leaves LRT as the only major newsroom with a full-time investigative staff — and with the budget to withstand legal challenges to its investigations, says Donauskaite, the director of the Lithuanian Journalism Centre. “You have to have more resources allocated for that,” she says, noting that LRT is still in independent news media, “a statement welcomed by journalists.

That’s great, says Ruslanas Irikėvicius, the editor at 15min English. But “You never know what might happen in the next election.”

Delfi, Lithuania’s number one portal, has built a robust mix of news and features, including an investigative series on Andrius Kuprevičius, who was charged on multiple counts of fraud.

That loss leaves LRT as the only major newsroom with a full-time investigative staff — and with the budget to withstand legal challenges to its investigations, says Donauskaite, the director of the Lithuanian Journalism Centre. “You have to have more resources allocated for that,” she says, noting that LRT is still in independent news media, “a statement welcomed by journalists.

That’s great, says Ruslanas Irikėvicius, the editor at 15min English. But “You never know what might happen in the next election.”
THE NEVER-ENDING STORY

Health reporters are holding officials accountable, documenting the virus’s devastating toll, and balancing the pandemic’s impact on their own lives

BY CHELSEA CIRRUZZO
For many health reporters, reporting on the coronavirus started long before most Americans realized the devastating impact it would have on their daily lives. Declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020, Covid-19 has killed more than 680,000 U.S. citizens and infected more than 42 million.

For Lena H. Sun, a national health reporter for The Washington Post, reporting on the virus began on Jan. 8, 2020. “An outbreak of an unidentified and possibly new viral disease in central China is prompting officials across Asia to take heightened precautions ahead of the busy Lunar New Year travel season,” she wrote in a co-bylined piece with Washington Post China correspondent Gerry Shih. Now, more than a year later, she is still on the story, sometimes writing several stories a day to cover all the new developments.

That marked one of the first and ongoing challenges for health reporters during the pandemic. Explaining to audiences not just the science but explaining why guidance had suddenly changed.

Early on, federal guidance told people to simply wash their hands frequently to protect themselves and that they wouldn’t need to wear face masks. “Then, new research came out that the virus could be spread asymptptomatically,” Sun says. “The public was given a new order: Mask up. However, President Donald Trump continued to cast doubt on the science by attacking public health experts. Dr. Anthony Fauci, for initially saying the public didn’t need to wear masks.

The confusion that can result from changing information has to do with anchoring bias, which occurs when information through the filter of that initial impression, people tend to remember the first thing they’ve learned about something. People “fall into a judgment error … where we give too much credit to the initial piece of information we received on a topic and perceive the rest of the information through the filter of that initial impression,” Gleb Tsipursky wrote in Scientific American. For example, a person buying a car may research the average price and then jump on the first offer that resembles that average price, rather than considering other factors relevant for buying a car, such as mileage and the possibility that there’s a cheaper vehicle of equal value.

During the pandemic, Tsipursky explains, people given guidance to not wear masks are likely to disregard new guidance on mask wearing, especially when they don’t see authority figures following it.

“We were legitimately reporting on the best available evidence at the time,” Helmut says. “You have to kind of both say, ‘Okay, here’s the new thing we know, and this old thing we thought we knew … was actually not correct.’” To maintain trust with readers, Helmut says being frank with them and debunking misinformation is key.

When it comes to vaccines, the rapid pace at which new information is coming out — from the speed at which new vaccines are approved to varying estimates on their safety and efficacy — has given way to confusion, hesitancy, and even dangerous instances of misinformation. One of the ways worst public satisfy doesn’t work.

In Florida, one reporter did just that by taking hundreds of calls from confused seniors and telling them what she knew about signing up for a vaccine appointment. In Texas, Gwendolyn Wu, a health care reporter for the Houston Chronicle, helps write a weekly Covid-19 Help Desk column where she answers four to five reader questions a week with insight from local public health experts.

“The thing that we, as health reporters, are still trying to figure out is how to deliver information in a way where people see it and they know the context behind it,” Wu says.

Answering questions about why a vaccine isn’t available is part of the health reporter’s job, too. “I’m seeing more and stronger reporting now about inequities in vaccine distribution that I didn’t see early on with deaths and testing,” says Aneri Pattani, a health reporter with Kaiser Health News. “It’s just gotten stronger and stronger as journalists have some time.”

Kaiser Health News recently published a piece reveal-
It was especially hard to be covering a disease that infected somebody in my family and killed them

LENA H. SUN

HEALTH REPORTER, THE WASHINGTON POST

of consistent public health messaging,” Sun says.

For health reporters, that meant doing something that isn’t typically their job. Calling out public officials, particularly Trump, for lying, then sharing the real information. The Atlantic compiled a list in November that included every false coronavirus claim by Trump throughout 2020, and then debunked it. A Lancet Commission report published in February said the U.S. could have averted 40% of its Covid-19 deaths and blamed the Trump administration’s response to the pandemic as well as the administration’s other policies, such as its weakening of health insurance coverage under the Affordable Care Act, as contributing factors.

The national death toll of the coronavirus has crested half a million, Helmuth says it’s important for reporters not to lose sight of those names and faces: “It’s easy to become kind of overwhelmed and just re-tweet stories and not really think about how horrid this robbs people of their loved ones, their health.”

One Washington Post reporter allows those people to speak for themselves. National reporter Eli Saslow is the reporter behind “Voices of the Pandemic,” an oral history of those impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, which has featured a woman who has seen seven people die of Covid-19 and a woman who has not yet fully recovered after becoming infected. CNN asks people to submit the stories of their loved ones and then shares some of them on air.

Health reporters are no exception to facing the impacts of the pandemic. While many reporters might remember the J-school mantra, “Don’t insert yourself into the story,” that, for many, may become impossible during a pandemic. Asian-American reporters, including Chen, have faced racist attacks, including a number of “unprintable racist emails and DMs,” she says. During his presidency, Trump often used the racist muhine “Chinese virus” to refer to the coronavirus. Between March 12 and Aug. 5, 2020, the Atlantic Pacific Policy and Planning Council said it received more than 2,500 reports of anti-Asian discrimination, including verbal and physical harassment.

“I am well aware that racism is alive and well in the U.S., but it is sad to see the unvarnished anger and hatred,” Chen says. In her reporting, Chen has heard grief, frustration, anger, demonization, and fear from the people she has interviewed. “I have to remind myself that it’s not my job to carry their emotions for them and there’s often nothing I can do.”

In these instances, it’s beneficial for reporters to take a step back and breathe a little, either by closing their computers or even taking a vacation or leave. For Chen, when her loved ones tell her they can tell she is stressed, she takes a break. “If I take a week, two weeks off, nobody’s going to miss me,” she says. “We can care for each other.”

For Pattani at Kaiser Health News, the personal and painful impacts of the pandemic have fed into her reporting. In October, she realized that the stress of the pandemic itself was exacerbating her chronic health issues. “That led me to think about, ‘Is this happening to other people?’” She ended up writing about it, describing migraines, teeth grinding and hair loss as symptoms of severe stress and offering tips from experts on how to reduce stress. She received messages from people across the country empathizing with her.

“It was kind of the silver lining of recognizing some- thing that was more universal than just my personal experience,” Pattani says.

But Pattani’s experience underscores the derit- mental impacts that stress has on reporters. When asked what they do for self-care, nearly every health reporter interviewed said something along the lines of, “I’m still working on it.” Some mentioned pets, family, exercise, or picking up hobbies as ways to re- lease stress.

“Now’s how Marlene Harris-Taylor, managing pro- ducer for health news at northeast Ohio’s Ideastream, copes for health news at northeast Ohio’s Ideastream. “We have to address their own stress as much as possible, and understand that we’re all in the middle of a situa- tion that’s causing chronic stress,” she says. “Chronic stress really does impact the cortisol levels, which can have long term implications.”

With a long road of recovery ahead, health re- porters say news outlets must continue to utilize them, invest in them, and integrate them across the newsroom. Helmuth, who became editor-in-chief of Scientific American in April 2020, says that includes helping health reporters develop specific skill sets, sending them to workshops, and allowing them to build their networks. For example, the Association of Health Care Journalists offers grants opportunities for reporting projects as well as workshops that have lately centered on helping reporters gather better data on the pandemic or write about the science behind the coronavirus. Helmuth also wrote a tipsheet for reporters covering the pandemic in early March 2020.

That also means continuing the focus on how the pandemic has deepened inequities and highlighted rac- ism in health, such as when wealthy white Los Angeles residents snapped up vaccine appointments meant for Black and brown communities. “Health and science are important on their own,” Helmuth says. “And the things that we cover will be true and relevant a week from now, whereas a lot of the daily politics news re- ally won’t.”

70% put the psychological and emotional impacts of dealing with the Covid-19 crisis at the top.

Recovery may take a while and Harris-Taylor urges reporters to get started now. “People really have to address their own stress as much as possible, and understand that we’re all in the middle of a situa- tion that’s causing chronic stress,” she says. “Chronic stress really does impact the cortisol levels, which can have long term implications.”

As long as reporters continue to tell stories, and understand the collateral damage, the pandemic will continue to shape the stories they report—both in their localities and worldwide.
“A woman ahead of her time”

Remembering Dr. Nancy Giles, who welcomed 11 classes of Nieman Fellows

Dr. Nancy Giles, a dedicated psychologist and author, welcomed 11 classes of Nieman Fellows in her time. The New York Times reported that, in 1983, Giles joined the Nieman Foundation as a Senior Fellow, and in 1984, she was named the inaugural Ida B. Wells Medal for Distinguished Service from the Nieman Foundation.

During her career as a psychologist, she often helped clients who were dealing with trauma. In 2005, Ohio Wesleyan recognized her as “an exemplary volunteer” and for her dedication to her alma mater. In 2014, Giles was named to the Nieman Foundation’s class of 2015.

During her tenure, she worked with groups including the American Red Cross, the Junior League, and OWU alumni groups. In recent years, she worked to volunteer at the Probate Court and other places in Traverse City, Michigan, where she and Bob had moved after leaving Cambridge.

In addition to Bob, she is survived by her children, David, Megan Giles Cooney and Rob, and four grandchildren.
Meet the 2022 Nieman Fellows

The Nieman Foundation for Journalism has selected 22 journalists from across the globe to join its 84th class of fellows. The journalists, who will study at Harvard University during the 2021-22 academic year, are working on projects that range from documenting the challenges facing marginalized communities, to exploring how journalism can enhance professionalism, fight misinformation, and renew that association.

**Meet the 2022 Nieman Fellows**

**Bill Barrow** (U.S.)

Bill Barrow, an Atlanta-based national political reporter for The Associated Press, is examining the intersection of movement and party politics in the United States, focusing on the institutional structures and prevailing social dynamics that are reshaping Democratic and Republican alliances in the early 21st century.

**Jorge Caraballo Cordovés** (Colombia)

Jorge Caraballo Cordovés, growth editor at “Radio Ambulante,” NPR’s only podcast in Spanish, is developing a toolkit for narrative journalism podcasts in Latin America, seeking to leverage the power of audio storytelling to strengthen community connections.

**Choy Yuk-ling (Bao Choy)** (Hong Kong/S.K., China)

Choy Yuk-ling, an investigative journalist and video producer, is studying how independent and investigative news outlets can evolve in order to survive the financial, legal, and political roadblocks set up by authoritarian governments.

**Reuben Fischer-Baum** (U.S.)

Reuben Fischer-Baum, a graphics editor at The Washington Post who leads a team of graphics reporters focused on visual stories about business and technology, is collecting lessons from the child to explore how to make interactive journalism more accessible to small newsrooms and help reproduce the audience growth that major news organizations have seen with this form of storytelling.

**Pu Ting** (China)

Pu Ting, an Associated Press reporter based in Thailand, is researching China’s global expansion, domestic living standards, and ongoing brain drain in the face of an economic slowdown that followed years of rapid growth. She is also examining how the country and the wider world are addressing the downturn and the resulting social challenges.

**Selase Kove-Seyram** (Ghana)

Selase Kove-Seyram, a digital media producer and head of digital strategy for the Tiger Eye Social Foundation, a media nonprofit, is studying how collaborative efforts to produce public service journalism could enhance professionalism, fight misinformation, and help restore public trust in journalism in West Africa.

**Patricia Laya** (Venezuela/Spain)

Patricia Laya, the Venezuela bureau chief for Bloomberg News, is studying Venezuela’s economic, sociopolitical, and health crises and tools of social oppression, and how the country’s authoritarian government has benefited from a population subdued by hunger, misery, and disease.

**Felice León** (U.S.)

Felice León, a video producer and presenter at the news site “The Root,” is manifesting the implications of Black joy from the antebellum era to the present, and the ways that the media can document these stories through visual storytelling.

**Julia Lurie** (U.S.)

Julia Lurie, a senior reporter at Mother Jones, is studying the complex history of the U.S. child welfare system and examining the system’s racial and socioeconomic inequities, the impact of the movement for racial justice on reform efforts, and the effects of the overdose epidemic and the coronavirus pandemic on families in the system.

**Pacimíte Mattar** (Canada)

Pacimíte Mattar, a journalist, writer, and producer based in Toronto, is studying how journalism can better foster, retain, and promote Black, Indigenous, and other racialized journalists. She is focusing on developing initiatives that lead to more representative newsrooms and coverage.

**Dave Mayers** (U.S.)

Dave Mayers, a documentary producer and cinematographer at Vice News, is studying the barriers to entry for those wishing to diversify documentaries, and the best methods for overcoming those challenges domestically and internationally.

**Shereen Marisol Meraji** (U.S.)

Shereen Marisol Meraji, most recently co-host and senior producer of NPR’s “Code Switch” podcast covering race and identity, is exploring ways for public media to attract and retain Latino audiences. After her fellowship, Meraji will join the Graduate School of Journalism at the University of California, Berkeley, as an assistant professor of race in journalism.

**Jakob Moll** (Denmark)

Jakob Moll, co-founder and former CEO of Zetland, a membership-based digital newspaper in Denmark, is studying how trust evolves on the preferred digital platforms of the younger generations and how these dynamics can help support the membership business model for news organizations.

**Marisa Palmer** (U.S.)

Marisa Palmer, a senior video producer for Business Insider’s news and documentary team, is studying the effects of government programs in the U.S. and will develop a database for journalists, communities, and police departments that ranks the programs by quality, efficacy, and accessibility.

**Deb Pastor** (U.S.)

Deb Pastor, director of photo and multimedia at the Star Tribune in Minneapolis, is examining how the racial reckoning in the wake of George Floyd’s death has altered the relationship between photojournalists and their subjects. She will explore ways to reframe and renew that association.

**Natalia Viana** (Brazil)

Natalia Viana, the co-founder and executive director of Agência Pública, Brazil’s first nonprofit investigative journalism outlet, is studying the erosion of democracy in Brazil and Latin America and the rise of far-right movements, with a focus on creating ethical and inclusive practices when using 360-degree video technologies to cover marginalized groups.
“Journalists Make Me Better”
When I think the work can’t matter, they show me it does

BY JOHN ARCHIBALD

Why do I do what I do? they asked. So, I went to the source of all wisdom to contemplate my place in the world: folk singer Todd Snider, the barefoot poet laureate of me. A man once said that the pinnacle of success is when you’re finally lost interest, in money, compliments, and publicity. A noble enough idea, I suppose. How on earth he does this, heaven only knows. I know I need a lot more of all three of those, before I ever have the nerve to turn up my nose. At any money, compliments, and publicity. Which — alas — is not the right answer. So, I got my first real journalism job 35 years ago at The Birmingham News in Alabama, where once merged with sister newspapers under the website AL.com. As a great, and sadly late, Pulitzer winner named Ron Casey put it, “If you want fine wine, go to France. If you want to write editorials, come to Alabama.”

So, I never left. I told myself it was possible to make a difference there, to tell stories and point out corruption and policies that kept the powerful in full power and the powerless with a lot less. That is as good as money, more solid than compliments, and more fulfilling than publicity. Despite political attacks on the press, journalists are the best people I’ve known. Which is why I do what I do — always. Because journalists are my idols. They always have been. Like Woodward and Bernstein, and Barlett and Steele, like Ida B. Wells and Steve Lopez and Cynthia Tucker and Sally Jenkins. Like people you’ve never heard of. The people who really care about this business are the most conscientious and devoted people I know. They stand for truth, integrity, and for those who can’t stand for themselves. They stand against tyranny, Twitter trolls, and weaponized, politically funded critics. Some of them face the threat of jail or death.

The real ones question themselves as much as others, examine their mistakes, and try to correct them. The others, well, they’re not journalists at all. When I focus on a world too small, journalists show me it is bigger. When I think the work can’t matter, they show me it does. When I get lost from looking inward, they show me the value of looking outward.

The more I contemplate this question — Why do I do what I do? — the more I trace the rooms to the student newspaper at the University of Alabama, The Crimson White. It was there, with an astonishing staff under the direction of editor Jan Crawford, that I learned to question, to hold authority to account, to speak up for those who had no platform, and, as editorial page editor, to say the things in print I’d never found the words to say with my mouth.

It also made me pay attention to the people who were attracted to journalism: idealists who hid their own hope beneath a veil of feigned cynicism. Journalism has changed a lot since then: Local news is under threat, business models are broken, stories that once splashed across communities now make but a ripple, Twitter is an occupational mental health hazard, and recent attacks on the press — and fact itself — drive good people out of the business, and readers away from it.

Like many journalists, I waffled on those changes as they came. But the more I became surrounded by innovative, mostly young, people seeking to change the world, the more I was reminded of my college paper, and why I got into this work. Those people — colleagues — changed me, saved me, opened my mind to new ways to deliver news: by column, or long form, or animated videos, by video columns, or podcasts, or cartoons, or whatever comes next. I love the written word, but the message is the message. Not the medium. We tried to keep one foot in the journalistic past, holding on to values and ethics the business demands, and another in the possibilities. It was fun again.

The more I thought of that, the more it answered the question: Why do I do what I do? For readers. For sustenance. For health insurance. But mostly I do it — because of the kind of people I get to work with. Despite political attacks on the press, true journalists are the best people I’ve known. It’s a broad statement, sure, but in my experience the jackasses are exceptions rather than rules. They are the reason I do what I do. Because journalists are my idols. They always have been. Like Woodward and Bernstein, and Barlett and Steele, like Ida B. Wells and Steve Lopez and Cynthia Tucker and Sally Jenkins. Like people you’ve never heard of. The people who really care about this business are the most conscientious and devoted people I know. They stand for truth, integrity, and for those who can’t stand for themselves. They stand against tyranny, Twitter trolls, and weaponized, politically funded critics. Some of them face the threat of jail or death.

The real ones question themselves as much as others, examine their mistakes, and try to correct them. The others, well, they’re not journalists at all. When I focus on a world too small, journalists show me it is bigger. When I think the work can’t matter, they show me it does. When I get lost from looking inward, they show me the value of looking outward.

Journalists make me better. Not just as a writer, or a commentator, but as a human. Which is why I do what I do.

84 NIEMAN REPORTS SUMMER/FALL 2021

AFTERIMAGE

“This assignment took me to a very silent place — a hospital in Western Poland with hastily erected Covid wards. … Outside of those walls, the ‘anonymity’ coming with face masks resulted in the cooling of any casual contacts. Seeing the two young paramedics taking care of that patient … was one of the most moving moments I have witnessed since the beginning of the pandemic.”

Maciek Nabrdalik, photojournalist and 2017 Nieman Fellow, on photographing the coronavirus pandemic in Poland
"WE LIVE AND WE LEARN OR WE DON’T LIVE AT ALL."
—JOHN ARCHIBALD, PAGE 34