THE NEW LOOK OF THE LABOR BEAT

FROM COVID-19 TO THE #METOO MOVEMENT, WORKPLACE COVERAGE IS RESURGENT
Contributors

Joshua Benton
Joshua Benton founded Nieman Lab in 2008 and served as its director until 2020, when he now is the Lab’s senior writer. Before spending a year at Harvard as a 2008 Nieman Fellow, he spent a decade in newspapers, mostly at The Dallas Morning News. He has reported from a dozen foreign countries, been a Pew Fellow in International Journalism, and three times been a finalist for the Livingston Award for International Reporting.

Celeste Katz Marston
Celeste Katz 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 WBAI New York. She is the co-author of “Is This Any Way To Vote? Vulnerable Voting Machines and the Mysterious Industry Behind Them” (WhoWhatWhy, 2020.)

Stefania D’Ignoti
Stefania D’Ignoti is a freelance journalist based in Sicily and Turkey.

Jared Downing
Jared Downing is a journalist based in New York City. He has extensive experience in Southeast Asia and currently works as editor and podcast producer for Climate & Capital Media.

Steven Greenhouse
Steven Greenhouse was a New York Times reporter for 35 years, covering labor and workplace matters from 1995 to 2019. He also served as the Times’ business correspondent in Chicago, its European economics correspondent in Paris, and as an economics and then diplomatic correspondent in Washington. He is the author of “Reborn, Down, Worked Up: The Past, Present, and Future of American Labor,” to be published this August by Knopf.

Vidya Krishnan

Contents Winter 2022 / Vol. 76 / No. 1

Features

Rock the Vote (Coverage) 8
As more states restrict ballot access, news outlets must invest in consistent voting rights reporting
By Celeste Katz Marston

It’s Time to Create an Alternative Path Into Journalism
An idea from K-12 education might help expand the pool of potential journalists
By Joshua Benton

The Labor Beat is Back 26
The pandemic has brought new urgency to labor issues — and fresh coverage of the changing nature of work
By Jared Downing

Standing Guard in India 46
The last few bastions of the free press are holding the Modi government to account
By Vidya Krishnan

“Young reporters with new perspectives are challenging the old guard” 52
Former ‘outlaw’ journalists lead the battle for a free press in Myanmar
By Jared Downing

Newsroomers Are Unionizing Pretty Much “Nonstop.” Here’s Why 35
Journalists are responding to consolidation and revenue challenges by joining the unionization wave
By Steve Greenhouse

Tackling Racism in Europe 40
Podcasters of color make their own space for conversations on race
By Stefania D’Ignoti

Departments

From the Curator 2
Ann Marie Lipinski

Live@Lippmann 4
The Emancipators’ co-editors-in-chief are building on the 19th-century abolitionist paper’s historical roots

Nieman@Work 6
Interrogating youth incarceration, building up journalism in Africa, and documenting a release from an Iranian prison

Nieman Notes 58
Sounding 60

As American journalists look less like the country they cover, an alternative certification path can diversify the field (p. 18)
A Green Light for Corruption

Researchers say there are tangible costs when a community loses its newspaper. The question is, do we want to pay now or pay later?

BY ANN MARIE LIPINSKI

Jonas Heese was skeptical. The Harvard Business School professor had heard the standard claims: When local newspapers close down, corporate corruption goes up. Yes, there was anecdotal evidence that national media could act as a corrective — perhaps a Wall Street Journal story about fraud at a production facility that hurt a company’s stock price. But Heese, a researcher of corporate crime, didn’t believe local news had the same sway.

“To be honest, I was probably more on the critical side,” he told me. “And even if local media can play a role, I thought maybe it’s still okay if it disappears because there are other things out there that would substitute. For example, social media, or some other monitors, maybe non-profit organizations, that shed light on problems. So, I was a little bit critical.”

Fauling Heese’s skepticism was a classic claim about media conflict-of-interest: If local newspapers rely on area businesses for advertising and their readers work at those companies, would reporters risk their wrath by targeting the firms for misconduct? As one media executive recently tweeted: “We like to argue that democracy hangs in the balance, and I believe that’s true. But that’s a squishy argument that can take over.” In the meantime, observe the vague belief that new digital actors have stepped up to replace the dying watchdogs. The documented misconduct, he says, is “a pretty big deal.”

In talking with Heese about his research, I saw how closely his initial skepticism mirrored common cultural assumptions about journalism, notably a vague belief that new digital actors have stepped up to replace the dying watchdogs. As one media executive recently tweeted: “The sooner legacy newspapers are bled to death, the sooner the disruptors will take over.” In the meantime, observe the flushing green light for costly corruption.

But Heese’s research and his own evolution of thought also show how inadequately journalists — and I’ll include myself here — have framed the evidence showing that the local press is an effective monitor of corporate misconduct. “Their disappearance, he said, is ‘a pretty big deal.’”

As local coverage contracts, like the Deseret News in Utah (above), one study shows that corporate corruption increases. The data examined by the researchers “captures how companies screw over their own employees, the environment, the government, or their shareholders,” said Heese, and included violations such as workplace safety and discrimination, accounting fraud and over billing, and pollution. The documented misconduct, he is said, is “the tip of the iceberg.”

“This is a very conservative number because we can only capture the detected violations and we only focus on facilities of publicly-listed firms. But there are many, many other private companies that can also pollute the environment and mistreat their employees.”

I asked Heese how he felt now about his early hypothesis. “Local newspapers really seem to matter,” he said. “Otherwise, we wouldn’t see that effect. If it was somehow possible on average that someone else stepped up and engaged in watchdog monitoring, then we should not be able to see that increase in violations. Local newspapers play an important role as a corporate monitor.”

Heese and his colleagues assert that their study provides “the first systematic evidence showing that the local press is an effective monitor of corporate misconduct.” Their disappearance, he said, is “a pretty big deal.”

Toxic emissions — which companies are required to report even when they are not illegal — skyrocketed almost 20 percent after a newspaper folded. The data examined by the researchers “captures how companies screw over their own employees, the environment, the government, or their shareholders,” said Heese, and included violations such as workplace safety and discrimination, accounting fraud and over billing, and pollution. The documented misconduct, he is said, is “the tip of the iceberg.”

“This is a very conservative number because we can only capture the detected violations and we only focus on facilities of publicly-listed firms. But there are many, many other private companies that can also pollute the environment and mistreat their employees.”

I asked Heese how he felt now about his early hypothesis. “Local newspapers really seem to matter,” he said. “Otherwise, we wouldn’t see that effect. If it was somehow possible on average that someone else stepped up and engaged in watchdog monitoring, then we should not be able to see that increase in violations. Local newspapers play an important role as a corporate monitor.”

As one media executive recently tweeted: “The sooner legacy newspapers are bled to death, the sooner the disruptors will take over.” In the meantime, observe the flushing green light for costly corruption.

But Heese’s research and his own evolution of thought also show how inadequately journalists — and I’ll include myself here — have framed the evidence showing that the local press is an effective monitor of corporate misconduct. “Their disappearance, he said, is ‘a pretty big deal.’”

In talking with Heese about his research, I saw how closely his initial skepticism mirrored common cultural assumptions about journalism, notably a vague belief that new digital actors have stepped up to replace the dying watchdogs. As one media executive recently tweeted: “The sooner legacy newspapers are bled to death, the sooner the disruptors will take over.” In the meantime, observe the flushing green light for costly corruption.

But Heese’s research and his own evolution of thought also show how inadequately journalists — and I’ll include myself here — have framed the evidence showing that the local press is an effective monitor of corporate misconduct. “Their disappearance, he said, is ‘a pretty big deal.’”

In talking with Heese about his research, I saw how closely his initial skepticism mirrored common cultural assumptions about journalism, notably a vague belief that new digital actors have stepped up to replace the dying watchdogs. As one media executive recently tweeted: “The sooner legacy newspapers are bled to death, the sooner the disruptors will take over.” In the meantime, observe the flushing green light for costly corruption.

But Heese’s research and his own evolution of thought also show how inadequately journalists — and I’ll include myself here — have framed the evidence showing that the local press is an effective monitor of corporate misconduct. “Their disappearance, he said, is ‘a pretty big deal.’”

In talking with Heese about his research, I saw how closely his initial skepticism mirrored common cultural assumptions about journalism, notably a vague belief that new digital actors have stepped up to replace the dying watchdogs. As one media executive recently tweeted: “The sooner legacy newspapers are bled to death, the sooner the disruptors will take over.” In the meantime, observe the flushing green light for costly corruption.
Bringing “The Emancipator” To Life
Co-editors Deborah Douglas and Amber Payne discuss building on the abolitionist paper’s historical roots

In March, The Boston Globe’s Opinion Team and Boston University’s Center for Antiracist Research announced plans to revive The Emancipator, the first abolitionist newspaper in the United States, initially founded in the 19th century. The resurrected Emancipator aims to “amplify critical voices, ideas, and evidence-based opinion in an effort to frame the national conversation and bust racism’s web.” Its advisory board boasts some of the nation’s most prominent scholars, journalists, and thinkers on racial justice, including The 1960 Project founder Nikole Hannah-Jones.

In June, The Emancipator announced that it had tapped Deborah D. Douglas and Amber Payne as its co-editors-in-chief. Prior to The Emancipator, Douglas was a journalism professor at DePaul University. She was also a senior leader at The Op-Ed Project, amplifying underrepresented expert voices, and managing editor of MLK Jr. Justice Through Journalism. Payne, a 2021 Nieman Fellow, was previously managing editor of BET.com and an executive producer at Teen Vogue and them., which centers LGBTQ+ voices.

Douglas and Payne spoke to Nieman Fellows in September about their visions for The Emancipator ahead of its anticipated launch. Edited excerpts:

On co-editing and deconstructing the traditional newsroom power hierarchy

Douglas: This question kept coming up: “That’s odd. Is this [co-editing] going to work?” One person thought that — expressed that — this flew in the face of everything that they believe about how newsrooms should build work.

When I heard that comment, we decided to address it in our mission. We’d like to think that we’re going to do things better, that we’ll be able to model for inclusive journalism.

Our leadership model is a way for us to share our intellect and creativity and talent in a way that shares responsibility for the communities that we serve and ensures power is the antidote to white supremacy, which is precarious with hoarding power and hierarchy.

Payne: We’re doing everything together. We’re in the process of creating this mindmeld, so we can react and operate as a single unit.

What that looks like is just being really open and transparent with each other. We debrief after every call. We talk about, “What came out of this? What’s the big idea? What’s the highpoints for you, and what are the action steps for you?”

Sometimes there are sparks stories that we tell each other from our backgrounds. There are things that we want to carry forward in our journalistic practice, and there are some practices that we would like to bury.

We’ve even talked about parts of our childhood belief systems that we no longer adhere to where we’ve developed a new set of values or that we’re continuing to reconcile. We talked about how that could inform the way we present projects and story ideas.

On cultivating a culture of joy

Douglas: Our mission says that joy underlies our ethos. If that exists on our platform, it needs to exist in our newsroom.

We are a joyful, can-do, entrepreneurial environment, and we are creating something from scratch together.

There’s a tendency to think about the struggle. We’re also thinking about the uplift and Black life and arts and culture. We’re trying to explore now, how do we also tell those stories in a way that will engage and grow audience?

On moving beyond the “Black newspaper” label

Douglas: We’re not viewing this as a Black publication. We’re looking at this as a mass or universal publication that just happens to use the Black experience as a doorway to a larger conversation.

Just like other communities have frequently been the default for where the conversation starts, because we’re grounded in this particular abolitionist history, that abolitionist history is the default, and then we go from there.

Payne: It’s two Black women who are the co-editors-in-chief, and we’re talking about emancipation, but we want these themes to be larger.

We know that our staff will be diverse and multiracial. We hope that may be one thing that is a clear indicator, and we hope that the content will also make that clear.

There are intersections from Native communities to Asian American communities. It’s not that we are going to be all things to all communities, but that there are these intersections with the Black experience really operating to and from.

Douglas: I even created a word for what happens specifically to Black women in spaces. I call it “decompressing.” I wrote about it in the chapter of “Four Hundred Souls.” It’s just a given now. Sometimes, I forget to be offended by things because it’s just so.

I’m just so used to it. It’s like you just get up. You start your day, and you just press forward with the best attitude and willingness to put all the intellect and muscle that you can into it and surround yourself by other people you know in the community and other people in the industry.

And for me, also other women across races. I’m also a senior leader at the Op-Ed Project, so the woman thing is important to me. I hear from so many women from marginalized backgrounds in this profession. To me, the only way I personally am making it through is just to be in relationships and share stories and share solutions and to build each other up in real time. Not just sometimes, not just when you come together at the annual conference, but in real time just build each other up.
A finger-frosting winter, we'd convene at the @work6 how conversations over coffee helped

Launching a Newspaper During a Pandemic
Tennessee Watson, NF ’20, on why policymakers across the country continue to invest in incarcerating children

The United States incarcerates kids at substantially higher rates than most other countries. That’s despite decades of research saying supportive programming addresses young people’s risky and harmful behavior more effectively than punitive measures. In parts of the U.S., that research has led to reforms, but not everywhere. So even though we know better, why do American policymakers continue to invest in juvenile incarceration?

Revealing the Failures of the Juvenile Justice System
Simon Allison, my co-founder of Nieman’s work at a downtown coffee shop near our then place of work and discuss journalism. We picked the venue because it had the strongest coffee in Johannesburg. The topic was inevitable for two people obsessed with this industry.

I was a news editor. Simon was an Africa editor. It was clear that our continent needed more quality journalism and a place to publish it. But initially none of our coffees — two shots for me, decaf for him — got us to any solution.

Then came Covid-19. Journalism took a serious hit, particularly in countries like South Africa with heavy lockdown measures. We knew all this would mean less journalism about Africa. Print newspapers couldn’t be distributed. Websites have been largely inadequate since our industry three content there for free. And, across Africa, people were engaging with information on their phones and across platforms like WhatsApp.

‘I had to talk to the people who were tasked with freeing me’
Jason Rezaian, NF ’17, wanted to tell the story of his release from an Iranian prison from multiple perspectives

It is early fall. Spotify released a podcast series I’ve been working on since just before the start of the pandemic. “544 Days” is an audio adaptation of my memoir “Prisoner” about my time in Iran’s Evin prison told from the perspectives of those who were working to secure my freedom.

Published in 2020, “Prisoner” was told from my own point of view. But I always knew there was a much bigger narrative to recount, and as the months passed after I regained my freedom, it became very important to me to report the story of what actually happened for two reasons.

First, since the details of my arrest, imprisonment, and the supposed case against me were distorted by Iran’s domestic propaganda machine, I needed to set the record straight. Even more important, though, the deal that resulted in my freedom became politically contentious here at home almost immediately. More than five years later, it remains so.

To make sense of what went on in the 18 months I was in prison, accused of being a spy, unable to defend myself, and sealed off from the world, I knew I had to talk to the people who were tasked with freeing me.

That began with my family — my wife, my mom, and my brother. In the countless conversations I had with them it became clear that each had very different feelings about the efforts of others working to win my release.

Several months after coming home, when I was feeling a bit more stable in the world, I began speaking with my colleagues at The Washington Post. There was so much I didn’t know about their interventions on my behalf in the earliest days of my detention. Finally, in the final year of the Obama administration, I had extraordinary access to the people in government who had negotiated both the nuclear deal with Iran and the deal to release American hostages.

When the book was released, I appeared on the Crooked Media podcast “Pod Save the World” to discuss it with Tommy Vietor and Ben Rhodes, the former deputy national security advisor for strategic communications under Obama involved in the efforts to free me.

When I finished that discussion, I said that I had audio interviews with many of the people who fought for my release including Ken, Marty Baron, and Anthony Bourdain. Tommy half-jokingly said, “Let’s make a podcast.”

Now, nearly three years later, we have his show, a joint production with Crooked Media, A24, and Gimlet edited by Alison MacAdam, NF ’14. (MacAdam was also part of the team that won a Peabody for the podcast “Believed,” a multipart series about the abuse Larry Nassar perpetuated as the team doctor for USA Gymnastics.)

That interplay between ordinary people and officials with extraordinary power — who happen to be ordinary people — is at the heart of “544 Days.” And I think that’s why it’s resonating with so many listeners.

A poetry contestant at the Harris Country Juvenile Detention Center
Wyoming Supreme Court, as well as local law enforcement agencies, I made my way into the story by spending time with the children caught up in the system and their families. There were patterns in the stories they told me. Trauma. Abuse. Anxiety. Depression. Autism. Learning disabilities. Suicide attempts.

Some of my reporting aired on Wyoming Public Radio. The story of one young woman and her family turned into an episode for Reveal, the hour-long radio show produced by the Center for Investigative Reporting. While problems with the juvenile justice system are under-reported, what gets covered often centers around urban communities. I wanted to shine a light on what’s happening to incarcerated kids in rural communities.

My reporting also resulted in a comic in the hopes of engaging younger audiences. All that work has drummed up attention. The state legislature has decided to study juvenile justice reform, and lawmakers are calling for data. There are bills on the table to improve juvenile justice practices that lawmakers will consider during its legislative session early this year.

For now, it’s wait and see. Not long ago, I was asked by a journalism student why policymakers don’t respond to reporting that makes a clear case as to why we’re doing something wrong. Here’s what I think it boils down to: When the children of the elected politicians get in trouble with the law or struggle with school, they can afford lawyers and tutors. They have the time to drive their children to mental health providers and other specialists. The families I interviewed don’t have those resources, and it’s up to journalists to amplify those stories.

Nieman Reports • Winter 2022

Coffee shop near our then place of work and discuss journalism. We picked the venue because it had the strongest coffee in Johannesburg. The topic was inevitable for two people obsessed with this industry.

I was a news editor. Simon was an Africa editor. It was clear that our continent needed more quality journalism and a place to publish it. But initially none of our coffees — two shots for me, decaf for him — got us to any solution.

Then came Covid-19. Journalism took a serious hit, particularly in countries like South Africa with heavy lockdowns. We knew all this would mean less journalism about Africa. Print newspapers couldn’t be distributed. Websites have been largely inadequate since our industry three content there for free. And, across Africa, people were engaging with information on their phones and across platforms like WhatsApp.

‘I had to talk to the people who were tasked with freeing me’
Jason Rezaian, NF ’17, wanted to tell the story of his release from an Iranian prison from multiple perspectives

It is early fall. Spotify released a podcast series I’ve been working on since just before the start of the pandemic. “544 Days” is an audio adaptation of my memoir “Prisoner” about my time in Iran’s Evin prison told from the perspectives of those who were working to secure my freedom.

Published in 2020, “Prisoner” was told from my own point of view. But I always knew there was a much bigger narrative to recount, and as the months passed after I regained my freedom, it became very important to me to report the story of what actually happened for two reasons.

First, since the details of my arrest, imprisonment, and the supposed case against me were distorted by Iran’s domestic propaganda machine, I needed to set the record straight. Even more important, though, the deal that resulted in my freedom became politically contentious here at home almost immediately. More than five years later, it remains so.

To make sense of what went on in the 18 months I was in prison, accused of being a spy, unable to defend myself, and sealed off from the world, I knew I had to talk to the people who were tasked with freeing me.

That began with my family — my wife, my mom, and my brother. In the countless conversations I had with them it became clear that each had very different feelings about the efforts of others working to win my release.

Several months after coming home, when I was feeling a bit more stable in the world, I began speaking with my colleagues at The Washington Post. There was so much I didn’t know about their interventions on my behalf in the earliest days of my detention. Finally, in the final year of the Obama administration, I had extraordinary access to the people in government who had negotiated both the nuclear deal with Iran and the deal to release American hostages.

When the book was released, I appeared on the Crooked Media podcast “Pod Save the World” to discuss it with Tommy Vietor and Ben Rhodes, the former deputy national security advisor for strategic communications under Obama involved in the efforts to free me.

When I finished that discussion, I said that I had audio interviews with many of the people who fought for my release including Ken, Marty Baron, and Anthony Bourdain. Tommy half-jokingly said, “Let’s make a podcast.”

Now, nearly three years later, we have his show, a joint production with Crooked Media, A24, and Gimlet edited by Alison MacAdam, NF ’14. (MacAdam was also part of the team that won a Peabody for the podcast “Believed,” a multipart series about the abuse Larry Nassar perpetuated as the team doctor for USA Gymnastics.)

That interplay between ordinary people and officials with extraordinary power — who happen to be ordinary people — is at the heart of “544 Days.” And I think that’s why it’s resonating with so many listeners.

A poetry contestant at the Harris Country Juvenile Detention Center
Wyoming Supreme Court, as well as local law enforcement agencies, I made my way into the story by spending time with the children caught up in the system and their families. There were patterns in the stories they told me. Trauma. Abuse. Anxiety. Depression. Autism. Learning disabilities. Suicide attempts.

Some of my reporting aired on Wyoming Public Radio. The story of one young woman and her family turned into an episode for Reveal, the hour-long radio show produced by the Center for Investigative Reporting. While problems with the juvenile justice system are under-reported, what gets covered often centers around urban communities. I wanted to shine a light on what’s happening to incarcerated kids in rural communities.

My reporting also resulted in a comic in the hopes of engaging younger audiences. All that work has drummed up attention. The state legislature has decided to study juvenile justice reform, and lawmakers are calling for data. There are bills on the table to improve juvenile justice practices that lawmakers will consider during its legislative session early this year. For now, it’s wait and see. Not long ago, I was asked by a journalism student why policymakers don’t respond to reporting that makes a clear case as to why we’re doing something wrong. Here’s what I think it boils down to: When the children of the elected politicians get in trouble with the law or struggle with school, they can afford lawyers and tutors. They have the time to drive their children to mental health providers and other specialists. The families I interviewed don’t have those resources, and it’s up to journalists to amplify those stories.

Nieman Reports • Winter 2022

Niemans
As more states restrict ballot access, news outlets must invest in consistent voting rights reporting that cuts through lies, distortion, and disinformation

by Celeste Katz Marston

In the fall of 2020, voters across the country waited in long lines to cast their ballots in a pivotal election, with press on hand to cover the action.

One Georgia TV reporter talked to an upbeat voter who said, “A lot of people have given up their lives to make it possible for us to vote, so standing here in the sun and checking my phone is not a sacrifice.” In Minneapolis, local news quoted a voter who waited two hours as insisting, “No matter how long it was going to take, I was going to get it done.” Other outlets ran stories about how people danced to pass the time, only mentioning much further down in the pieces concerns that long lines could hinder people from voting.

When Christina Greer thinks about all the “inspirational” news stories she’s read about people for whom the mere act of voting has become an endurance sport, she’s not inspired by the coverage. She’s exasperated.
“That’s not a feel-good story,” adds Greer, noting that reporters cover it “like this is the greatest thing since sliced bread.” It’s a symptom of a larger problem, Greer explains: The media by and large is failing to add key context to stories about voting and hasn’t caught on that the Republicans have mounted a coordinated assault on voting rights in the run-up to the 2022 election. “My frustration with the press is that we’re reporting on two parties as though they’re both just trying to do what’s right, and it’s actually not the case. We have [to] be honest about what is happening.”

In the year since the election, which saw a record number of votes cast, legislators in 19 Republican-led states from Georgia to Texas have enacted nearly three dozen laws designed to “make it harder for Americans to vote,” according to the Brennan Center for Justice. False claims of widespread voter fraud made by former President Donald Trump and his followers have triggered the recounting of ballots months after the election was certified, spurring calls for tougher voter I.D. requirements, limits on early and mail-in voting, and expanded voter roll purges. In Washington, D.C., Republicans have repeatedly blocked Democratic-proposed measures to protect access to the ballot.

Journalists covering voting rights have run up against a number of hurdles: Voting laws and practices vary widely from state to state, change periodically, and have technical aspects that take time to learn. At the same time, cash-strapped newsrooms continue to struggle financially, leaving fewer reporters on the voting rights beat. On top of all that, the tactics used to influence lawmakers and disenfranchise voters through social media have evolved.

Research shows that minorities are more likely to encounter long lines to vote and that Black women, in particular, are willing to endure long waits at the polls to exercise their rights. But when reporters approach pieces in the vein of, “Oh my gosh, how beautiful is this? She waited 10 hours to vote,” says Greer, an associate professor of political science at Fordham University, “all I [see is] the story of voter suppression. How the hell is someone waiting 10 hours to vote?” Instead of explaining why certain communities had to wait in long lines compared to others, many news outlets frame it as a heartwarming story about an individual who is willing to make extraordinary efforts to exercise their franchise.
**21st century voter suppression is not jelly beans in a jar or bubbles in a bar of soap**

As Errin Haines of *The 19th* puts it, referring to impossible tasks once used to bar Black Americans from casting ballots, “21st century voter suppression is not jelly beans in a jar or bubbles in a bar of soap.”

As the 2020 midterm approach and the gerrymandering of election maps continues, deep, nuanced, and consistent coverage of voting rights is essential to keep the public informed about the threats to their fundamental right to cast a ballot.

**GROWING THREATS TO VOTING RIGHTS**

About 10 years ago, Ari Berman wrote a piece for *Rolling Stone*, “The GOP War on Voting.” It foretold many of the voting restriction efforts of today, which “could prevent millions of students, minorities, immigrants, ex-convicts, and the elderly from casting ballots,” he warned.

Now, much of what Berman explained in that seminal piece is better understood — and openly stated. The Republican Party believes it’s advantageous to limit the number of people who can vote. Trump himself, in the run-up to the 2020 election, disparaged Democratic voting initiatives, saying of them, “They had things, levels of voting that if you’d ever agreed to, you’d never have a Republican elected in this country again.”

After Trump lost and wasn’t able to pressure election officials — especially in Georgia, where he asked the secretary of state to “find 11,780 votes” — to overturn the results, Republicans in states from Alabama to Wyoming enacted dozens of strict laws that curbed absentee voting, gave more power to partisan poll watchers, eliminated same-day registration, eliminated polling locations, and in one case even gave partisan lawmakers in the state legislature the power to suspend county and municipal level election superintendents. These measures have a disproportionate effect on minorities and students — many of whom often, but not always, align with Democratic policy positions and candidates.

Few news outlets have had reporters dedicated specifically to covering the voting rights beat, says Berman, now a senior reporter at Mother Jones and author of *Give Us the Ballot: The Modern Struggle for Voting Rights in America.* “The threats to those rights have been growing at the state level in a piecemeal way across the country. It’s really difficult for national media to encompass the entire story. You’d see [a story in *The Times* here or a story in *The Post* there, but it was all very localized].”

Berman recalls, by the time Trump ran, “2016 was the first presidential election in 50 years without the full protections of the Voting Rights Act, and there wasn’t a single question about voting rights at any of the presidential debates. The issue just wasn’t part of the national consciousness, and [it] just wasn’t thought of as a major story”

Heading into the 2021 and 2024 elections, and with newly gerrymandered electoral maps starting to appear, journalists will also have to cover redistricting, a highly politicized process that takes place every 10 years.

In North Carolina, a Republican-led state with an electorate that splits roughly 50-50 between Democrats and Republicans in statewide elections, the new map clustered Democrats into three districts, leaving open the possibility that Republicans win 11 of the 14 House seats. In states like Texas and Wisconsin, congressional and state legislative districts are being drawn in a way that favors white voters over Latino, Black, and Asian American voters — populations that are growing faster than their white counterparts.

This is the background against which the fight over voting rights is unfolding in Congress. As Republicans continue to block both the John Lewis Voting Rights bill, legislation that would buttress the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and the Freedom to Vote Act, which has provisions designed to make voting easier and reform the redistricting process, reporters naturally focus on the obstruction.

“It’s easy to think about this as politics. It’s easy to think about this as state policy,” says voting rights and demographics reporter Alexa Ura of The Texas Tribune. “In reality, we’re talking about individual people and their ability to exercise this right that we talk about the need to cherish and honor.”

**STARTING COVERAGE ON ELECTION DAY IS TOO LATE**

Reporters covering voter rights, rights and elections administration full time or most of the time remain relatively few compared to those who cover general politics or government. “Voting is a thing that we care about seasonally. It is not the city council that meets every week … but there’s a lot of political drama when an election kicks off,” says voting rights expert and political director of Votebeat, a non-profit that exclusively covers voting and elections. “This is something that most people engage with every two to every four years.”

Although voting rights may be a topic of national conversation, election administration is an intricate system, different in every state, that takes time and sourcing to master. State and county authorities set the system, different in every state, that takes time and sourcing to master. State and county authorities set the rules for how their elections are run, buy the machines that will be used in a year and a half are being purchased now — so it will be too late to cover how bad these machines are right before we vote on them. You need to cover that now,“ when other pressing issues demand attention. Newsrooms “wouldn’t interact with the criminal justice system by only covering it when someone is up on a murder trial … but there’s no equivalent of that for voting,” Huseman points out. She urges newsrooms to view local government and civil rights coverage as related beats because the function of the first directly impacts the second.

When people think of news stories about voting rights, it’s perhaps easier to envision a segment showing a march with signs and chanting or one showing a hearing on poll site locations or the award of a contract for new ballot scanners. Think about it: How many Americans could name a single major voting machine manufacturer — and there are only a few dominating the U.S. market — before Trump allies tried to accuse Dominion Voting Systems of conspiring to rig the 2020 election? How many newsrooms regularly track not only new voter registrations, but purges of voting voter rolls or poll site closings from cycle to cycle?

Familiarity with local voting regulations and policies can give reporters a big leg up. Jen Fifield of the Arizona Republic was dubbed “Blue Pen Jen” during the Cyber Ninjas audit after she noticed (and tweet-ed) that workers at the Arizona Veterans Memorial Coliseum in Phoenix had blue pens which potentially could have been used to alter ballots, instead of pens with red ink that would not be read by scanners. It was a small detail that got a lot of national pickup because it told a bigger story about the qualifications (or lack thereof) of Cyber Ninjas to conduct such a review of the vote, she says — and Fifield noticed it because she’d educated herself on the local rules about ballots and ink. “It gave me hope that local reporters can bring attention to issues like voting rights in ways that national reporters can’t, because we’re on the ground level,” Fifield says. (“The Cyber Ninjas review concluded that Joe Biden had, in fact, won Arizona.”

Voting rights reporters like Fifield stress that understanding the election system before the voting begins...
Voting rights isn’t a single topic but can be covered across an array of beats. It became a huge business story — and even a sports story — in Georgia last year, when Major League Baseball pulled its All-Star Game out of Atlanta in a public statement against restrictive legislation. Education reporters can look at how voting rights and civics are taught in schools; government reporters can dedicate part of a budget story to spending on election administration. It’s also a criminal justice issue: Outlets like The Marshall Project, which focuses on topics such as incarceration, policing, and mental health, have reported extensively on restoration of felon voting rights, including a joint investigation with the Louisville Courier-Journal and USA Today Network that found only a fraction of formerly incarcerated people in four key states made it back onto the voter rolls in time for the 2020 election. The story pointed out that “None of the states in our analysis required corrections department or boards of elections to notify newly eligible voters of their rights.”

Technological literacy has also become a bigger part of coverage of voting rights. And, reporting on how campaigns and dark money actors use technology to persuade voters — and in some cases, try to stop them from exercising their franchise — is an increasingly important part of this beat. Scrutiny of data caches can reveal what’s going on behind the scenes in a way that wasn’t previously possible. For example, even as campaigns scramble to develop new methods to motivate voters, they also work to deter others from showing up. Investigative reporting by Channel 4 News, a U.K.-based broadcaster, showed the Trump campaign in 2016 put 3.5 million Black Americans in a “deterrence” category, meaning it actively used social media and negative TV ads to discourage minorities in states like Georgia and Florida from voting for Democrat Hillary Clinton.

Civil rights organizations blasted the race-based profiling as “modern-day voter suppression.” The ads “included videos featuring Hillary Clinton referring to Black youth as ‘super predators’ which aired on television 424 times in October 2016 and received millions of views on Facebook,” Channel 4 reported. Its analysis of a database used by Trump’s digital campaign operation found that Black voters were targeted to receive the deterrent ads in much higher proportion than their share of the population in states including Georgia, North Carolina, and Wisconsin.

Journalists on the tech beat and even those who cover defense have been pulled into reporting on this topic, particularly the cybersecurity angle as it pertains to instances of foreign meddling in U.S. campaigns and elections. (Elections were designated part of the country’s critical infrastructure in 2017.) The right to vote arguably loses meaning if Americans cannot confidently vote not only freely and fairly, but securely, and there’s evidence that not all those goals have been fully achieved. A 2020 Politico piece examined multiple issues states still had to address to make elections more secure, including replacing paperless voting machines, hiring the brakes on the drive for voting by internet, and changing the way election results are audited for accuracy.

PRO-VOTER BIAS

When it comes to voting-related legislation, for newsrooms short on time and staff, it can be tempting to slip into horserace, hot take-heavy pack coverage. “The risk is that it’s going to be covered as an inside-baseball process story [as opposed to what the bill would actually do],” Mother Jones’ Berman says.

Reporters who cover voting say “bothsidesism” must be eschewed — particularly when covering claims of non-existent systemic voter fraud, which are often used to advance restrictive measures like voter I.D. requirements.

After Trump and his supporters refused to accept Biden’s victory in November 2020 and instead doubled down on false claims of election rigging, Grace Panetta, a senior politics reporter who covers voting rights for The Heritage Foundation — by laying out for readers that statistically, Americans are more likely to be hit by lightning than commit fraud through mail or in-person ballots. But when more liberally inclined sources attacked Kentucky as a hotbed of voter suppression for curtailing the number of in-person polling places in the same election, Panetta fact-checked those claims, too,
covering threats to the right to vote — or, at least, doing it well — is inextricably linked to what even the most dedicated beat reporters admit can be pretty dry stuff. It’s a lot easier to focus on something relatable — even if it isn’t really the biggest issue. The classic example is the coverage of Georgia’s ban on giving water (or food) to someone waiting in line to vote, which is easier to understand and visualize than the technical aspects of I.D. matching or who has the power to certify election results.

“Election Integrity Act” got more than 500,000 views. Lai cautions that curtailing poll site hours could have an outsized impact on certain voters. But he cautions that commonly scrutinized information, such as turnout, doesn’t tell the whole story about an election — or threats to voting rights. “It is a binary data point: Did you vote or did you not vote? It does not capture the cost of that vote,” he says.

Experiences vary widely, he says, noting some people only have to wait in line for a few minutes to cast their ballots while others have to wait hours. “If somebody voted, it doesn’t tell us that they stood outside in the rain for an hour,” he explains. “If somebody didn’t vote, it doesn’t tell us that they drove over, saw the rain and the long line, and went home. So drawing conclusions from voter turnout is very dangerous, and we have to be very careful about how we do it.”

Jonathan Lai of The Philadelphia Inquirer oversees multiple roles. He’s both the data and democracy reporter and the editor of data-driven storytelling. In his data and democracy role, Lai — whose work has been widely cit-

niiting to other things that mega-voting centers (the Kentucky Exposition Center was big enough to accommodate 18 separate lines), early voting, and absentee voting without an official excuse required for reasonably smooth election in the end.

Being “non-biased and non-partisan” is extremely important to me, but I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with [saying], “This is a big deal. This is misinformation. This is not true,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panetta says. The both sides paradigm is “ outdated when it’s not entirely, but disproportionately, leaders of [one] political party frame their policies that way; I’ve really had to get more comfortable in covering this beat with,” Panett
IT’S TIME TO CREATE AN ALTERNATIVE PATH INTO JOURNALISM

We need to expand the pool of people who can enter the industry, and an idea from K-12 education might help. By Joshua Benton

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ANDREA DESANTIS
Some journalism debates will never die. “Are bloggers journalists?” “Is objectivity achievable, just a goal to strive toward, or dumb?” And the classic: “Journalism school: worthwhile investment or giant scam?”

It’s that last one that flared up a few months back with the publication of a story in The Wall Street Journal that noted, correctly, that journalism school costs a lot of money, but journalists don’t make a lot of money:

Many students leave even the most prestigious private graduate programs, such as those at Northwestern University, Columbia University, and the University of Southern California, with earnings too low to let them make progress paying off their loans, according to a Wall Street Journal analysis of Education Department figures released this year.

At Northwestern, students who recently earned a master’s degree in journalism and took out federal loans borrowed a median $54,900 — more than three times as much as their undergraduate counterparts did. That is the biggest gap of any university with available data. Worse still, the master’s degree holders make less money. Early-career earnings for those with master’s degrees in journalism from Northwestern are about $1,500 lower than for their undergraduate students, data show.

That clinches it, people. Your latest wild get-rich-quick scheme — getting a graduate degree in journalism from a private university — probably isn’t going to work. The scheme — getting a graduate degree in journalism from noted, correctly, that journalism school: worthwhile investment or giant scam?”

As it stands now, there are four major paths to getting your first full-time job in the American news business. (I will acknowledge upfront that these are simplifications, that people’s real-world careers often take elements from several of them, and that some lucky unicorns will make it in the business without following any of the paths, or you can change what happens to you for inflation, to $70,300. Including fees and living expenses, total costs for each program top $100,000...)

Graduate students at private journalism schools borrow heavily to attend the programs. At USC’s Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, master’s graduates from 2015 and 2016, the latest cohorts for which both loan balances and salaries are available, had median loan burdens of $67,700. The median loan burden was $56,700 at Columbia.

It would be hard to describe these numbers as surprising, and many of the reactions to them were also standard fare. There were The Successful Journalists Who Didn’t Go To Journalism School And Think It’s Insane. The Successful Journalists Who Went to J-School But Back When Prices Were Reasonable. The J-School Grads Who Hate The Price But Felt They Had To Go Nonetheless. The Young Journalists Who Still Worry It’s Essential For A Good Career. And, of course, there were The Mizzou Grads, one of whom shared on Twitter that if you get a teaching assistant position, your tuition is waived. (The university itself tweeted “World-class education, far less student debt, higher salaries. What are you waiting for?” with a link to the story.)

There are good points to be made on all sides here. Journalism has a diversity problem. Actually, it has diversity problems, plural: racial diversity, class diversity, gender diversity, geographic diversity, and more.

And there are really only two major ways such problems can be addressed. You can change who gets to enter the profession, or you can change what happens to them once they’re already in it.

That second one is mostly the turf of bosses — editors, recruiters, executives, and the other people who determine how newsrooms work. But who gets to become a journalist? That’s a place where journalism education has a giant role to play — to serve either as an enabler or a barrier for those trying to enter the field.

And costing more than $100,000 is a pretty good sign that you’re a barrier.

Can that change? I think there might be a way to take an idea from K-12 education to help journalism open its doors a little bit wider.

JOURNALISM HAS A DIVERSITY PROBLEM. ACTUALLY, IT HAS DIVERSITY PROBLEMS, PLURAL: RACIAL DIVERSITY, CLASS DIVERSITY, GENDER DIVERSITY, GEOGRAPHIC DIVERSITY, AND MORE

They did some journalism work as undergrads, usually at the student paper, often reaching a top job there. They got a little professional work experience at a summer internship or two, and they’re ready to apply for staff jobs at graduation.

It’s important to note that these two paths are often not always, but often — taken by people from different class backgrounds. The nation’s elite private colleges generally don’t offer undergraduates a journalism major. Only two of the top 25 national universities in U.S. News’ rankings offer a journalism major. In the Ivy League, only Columbia has a J-school, and it’s for graduate students only.

Meanwhile, you can get a journalism degree just about anywhere, at any state or public university, or you can train on the job...

The J-School Master’s Degree Path. You start a career outside journalism, but at some point, for some reason, you decide you want a change. You decide it’s important enough to you to step out of your normal life and spend a year or two focused on learning the craft of journalism. You enroll in a master’s degree program at a journalism school, pay what is usually a lot of money, and then enter the job market after graduation.

For the Journalism Undergrad and J-School Master’s Degree paths, the primary credential you bring to an employer is your education. For the School Newspaper
of journalism schools is that it will help graduates get a decent job in the industry, that claim is demonstrably false because “plenty of successful working journalists never went to J-school.” Which is true! But a lot of successful working journalists did go to J-school — and not because they thought it meant they would be able to skip getting internships. They were so they could get internships, because that’s what the state of journalism requires for people without the social connections to break into the industry — especially those who are low-income or of color.

As a black woman I didn’t have a choice not to go to J-school — and that’s a sentiment shared among many of my classmates. Journalism is an industry rife with nepotism, where career trajectories are determined more often by the people you know rather than the quality of your work. When journalists of color make up less than 17 percent of American newsrooms and 75 percent of white people have no nonwhite friends, making connections in the industry after graduation is a luxury afforded to very few. Breaking into these elite spaces is a necessity, and journalism school not only gives you access to professors with connections but also the future journalists who could put you in contact with your next hire manager. As important as journalism internships are — and they are important — screeners advocating against J-school rarely acknowledge that a fair amount of journalists who look like me need the institutional legitimacy of places like Northwestern to even get an internship. And for people who can’t afford to work a low-paid or unpaid internship after college, getting your foot in the door as early as possible is paramount.

In a previous life, I wrote about K-12 education for the Dallas Morning News. One of the defining characteristics of growth in Dallas area is growth. There’s always another acre of corn fields ready to be turned into subdivisions and strip malls. (The school district in suburban Frisco had about 7,500 students when I moved to Dallas 21 years ago. Today it has more than 65,000.) Lots of new students meant lots of new teachers, and Texas had to figure out where to find them.

There’s a traditional path for people who want to become teachers: You go to college and major in education. Do that, pass a teacher certification exam, and you’re officially a teacher. (I fully acknowledge this process varies officially a teacher.)

As a black woman I didn’t have a choice not to go to J-school — and that’s a sentiment shared among many of my classmates. Journalism is an industry rife with nepotism, where career trajectories are determined more often by the people you know rather than the quality of your work. When journalists of color make up less than 17 percent of American newsrooms and 75 percent of white people have no nonwhite friends, making connections in the industry after graduation is a luxury afforded to very few. Breaking into these elite spaces is a necessity, and journalism school not only gives you access to professors with connections but also the future journalists who could put you in contact with your next hire manager. As important as journalism internships are — and they are important — screeners advocating against J-school rarely acknowledge that a fair amount of journalists who look like me need the institutional legitimacy of places like Northwestern to even get an internship. And for people who can’t afford to work a low-paid or unpaid internship after college, getting your foot in the door as early as possible is paramount.

There’s a path for you. It’s called alternative certification, and it’s meant for career switchers who have the content knowledge but not the teaching experience. For people who hadn’t figured out their career path at age 19, in other words.

Alternative certification programs have been very successful in two important ways. They’ve brought a lot of talented teachers into education and they’ve been a big part of increasing the field’s diversity.

As of 2019, American K-12 teachers who’d taken the traditional route to certification were 82.2% white, 7.9% Hispanic, and 5.3% Black. Those who’d taken the alternative route were significantly more diverse: 66.5% white, 15.5% Hispanic, and 12.9% Black.

In other words, alt-cert teachers are more diverse than those who are Black or Hispanic than traditionally certified ones. At one point in Texas, 9% of all K-12 teachers were non-white, but 4% of those who came through alt-cert programs were.

ALT-CERT PROGRAMS HAVE BEEN VERY SUCCESSFUL IN BRINGING TALENTED TEACHERS INTO EDUCATION AND DIVERSIFYING THE FIELD

ALT-cert teachers were also significantly more likely (32% vs. 22%) to be teaching math or science — in demand jobs that schools usually have the most trouble filling. They were also more likely (35% vs. 22%) to be men, who are less likely to plan a teaching career straight out of high school.

To be clear, there are plenty of legitimate complaints about alternative certification programs. First of all, there are a ton of them, they’re not amassing well regulated, and some are better than others. (Just like education schools, I might add.) Some of them are for-profit, some are nonprofit, and some are part of well established education schools. Some require little to no training as a teacher before dumping someone into a classroom. Schools need to keep an eye on them to make sure they’re meeting minimum standards and producing sound rookie teachers.

But there’s no doubt that alt-cert programs have, on net, been a big win for schools. “To back to school and get another degree” just isn’t going to be a reasonable choice.
move on or be asked to. A year, but that impact can be intense and long-lasting. A classroom teacher might only affect 30 kids during their career, so one might think the state of education is more dependent on the teaching than for journalists. Having a bad teacher for just one or two years can throw a kid’s entire education. Being a journalist doesn’t require as much study and preparation as a classroom teacher. However, there are still instances where there’s not much difference between how much a student learns from an alt-cert teacher versus a trad-cert one. (Some suggest alt-certs are slightly better at teaching science, English, and math but slightly worse at teaching English, for instance.) For an alt-cert program in journalism to work, it would need to:

- Be cheap. I’m talking low four digits, not low six digits.
- Be available anywhere. Don’t make people uproot their lives.
- Be flexible in terms of time. So people can keep their jobs and the schedules of their lives.
- Allow for some degree of networking. Faces to go with names.
- Have some amount of institutional prestige. If hiring editors don’t view it as a valuable credential, it’s not worth it.

So, what would an “alternative certification” program that makes sense for journalism look like?

The most famous teacher alt-cert program is Teach For America, so one might think of the analogous program for America, which currently places hundreds of young journalists into local newsrooms around the country, paying Cambridge rent for two years.

I think Report for America is terrific, and they should hire on their own. (Forty-five percent of the entering — or, frankly, than who those newsrooms are way more diverse than the newsrooms they’re entering — or, frankly, than who those newsrooms would be hiring on their own. (Forty-five percent of the current group are people of color.) There are J-schools that offer programs more contain than a full master’s degree, like CUNY’s J+, but there’s a financial commitment — and a structural commitment — that’s far too much for a lot of people. And while some colleges have seen the pandemic as an opportunity to learn more online programs, most will charge you roughly the same for an online master’s as for an in-person one. (The online master’s in journalism innovation in Syracuse’s Newhouse School, for example, runs $64,112.) And many still expect you to take a full schedule of classes, maintaining your day job more difficult.

So people can keep their jobs and the schedules of their lives.

- Allow for some degree of networking. Faces to go with names.
- Have some amount of institutional prestige. If hiring editors don’t view it as a valuable credential, it’s not worth it.

The degree program that you probably associate with Report for America would be hiring on their own. (Forty-five percent of the entering — or, frankly, than who those newsrooms are way more diverse than the newsrooms they’re entering — or, frankly, than who those newsrooms would be hiring on their own. (Forty-five percent of the current group are people of color.) There are J-schools that offer programs more contain than a full master’s degree, like CUNY’s J+, but there’s a financial commitment — and a structural commitment — that’s far too much for a lot of people. And while some colleges have seen the pandemic as an opportunity to learn more online programs, most will charge you roughly the same for an online master’s as for an in-person one. (The online master’s in journalism innovation in Syracuse’s Newhouse School, for example, runs $64,112.) And many still expect you to take a full schedule of classes, maintaining your day job more difficult.

So people can keep their jobs and the schedules of their lives.

- Allow for some degree of networking. Faces to go with names.
- Have some amount of institutional prestige. If hiring editors don’t view it as a valuable credential, it’s not worth it.

The degree program that you probably associate with Report for America would be hiring on their own. (Forty-five percent of the entering — or, frankly, than who those newsrooms are way more diverse than the newsrooms they’re entering — or, frankly, than who those newsrooms would be hiring on their own. (Forty-five percent of the current group are people of color.) There are J-schools that offer programs more contain than a full master’s degree, like CUNY’s J+, but there’s a financial commitment — and a structural commitment — that’s far too much for a lot of people. And while some colleges have seen the pandemic as an opportunity to learn more online programs, most will charge you roughly the same for an online master’s as for an in-person one. (The online master’s in journalism innovation in Syracuse’s Newhouse School, for example, runs $64,112.) And many still expect you to take a full schedule of classes, maintaining your day job more difficult.
The pandemic has brought new urgency to labor issues—and fresh coverage of the changing nature of work

BY STEVE GREENHOUSE
Recognizing that the Covid outbreak at Tyson was an important labor story, Rivers and her editors jumped on it even though their paper covered labor issues only infrequently before the pandemic. After years of cutbacks, only a handful of reporters remained at the Courier, and it even though their paper covered labor issues only infrequently before the pandemic. After years of cutbacks, only a handful of reporters remained at the Courier, and with as many financially battered newsrooms, labor coverage was an early casualty of the paper’s downsizing. The labor beat, which in the decades before World War II was considered a marquee assignment, began to fade away along with the power and prominence of the unions being covered.

But in the last dozen years, there has been a resurgence of the labor beat, largely fueled by two developments: the Great Recession, which saw the jobless rate jump to 10 percent, and the rise of digital media, which often tilts to the left and has many readers who are mistreated. In 2020, as the pandemic took hold, labor stories became many of the nation's biggest news stories: the millions of workers laid off when businesses shuttered temporarily, the risks facing grocery and transit workers, the dangers facing health care workers, the abuse flight attendants receive from passengers refusing to wear masks, the work-from-home revolution, the many frightened teachers who wanted their schools closed. More recently, other pandemic-related labor stories have leapt onto the front page, including the debate over vaccine mandates for workers, the labor shortage in many industries, and the record number of Americans quitting their jobs in what has been called the Great Resignation. “The pandemic has really been a galvanizing event in terms of labor coverage,” said Christopher Martin, a professor of digital journalism at the University of Northern Iowa.

With the flood of workplace stories in this unprecedented moment, it seems likely that labor coverage will remain strong and perhaps even grow. In decades past, labor reporters usually focused on covering labor unions, their strikes, and contract negotiations. Today, the beat has expanded to include everything from how Uber treats its drivers to some Amazon workers not having enough time to go to the bathroom to issues like the #MeToo movement, work-family balance, and the lack of childcare. During the pandemic, traditional concepts of office work have been radically altered and the relationships between employers and employees have changed, as well. All this is raising broader questions that journalists will need to cover: Will many white-collar workers never return to the office? Will the labor shortages accelerate the introduction of new automation? Will pandemic-battered workers increasingly seek to unionize, as we’ve seen at Starbucks and Amazon? Will the Great Resignation cause American corporations to treat their workers better?

IN NEWSPAPERS ACROSS THE United States, the labor beat once had a major presence, whether it was covering the Flint sit-down strike in the 1930s, corruption in the Teamsters in the 1950s, the rise of Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers in the 1960s, or Ronald Reagan crushing the air traffic controllers’ strike in 1981. The beat solidified during the 1930s and the Great Depression, when there was an explosion of strikes and workplace protests and landmark New Deal legislation was enacted, leading to a burst of unionization at auto plants, steel mills, coal mines, and many other workplaces.

Louis Stark, who was The New York Times’ labor beat reporter at the time, became a model with his in-depth articles about sit-down strikes, new labor legislation, and fierce union battles in Harlan County, Kentucky. In 1941, Stark won a Pulitzer Prize for his “distinguished reporting of important labor stories.” In the late 1940s and early 1950s, there was tremendous labor turmoil, with more than 400 large strikes some years. At times, labor was the nation’s dominant story, whether it was a nationwide railroad strike, a coal miners’ walkout, or President Truman seeking to seize the nation’s steel mills in 1952. Many days,
Newspapers ran several labor stories on their front page. I remember counting seven labor stories on a New York Times front page from the late 1990s.

But the labor beat began a steep decline late last century. Starting in the 1970s, as newspaper chains acquired family-owned papers, and as many executives with MBAs moved into the publisher’s suite, newspapers increasingly targeted affluent, college-educated, and suburban readers (who advertisers wanted to reach). At the same time, they cut back coverage that targeted working-class readers. As a result, Martin has written, there were fewer stories about labor and more stories about food, travel, lifestyle, and how to invest — stories geared to upscale readers. In his book, “No Longer about Food, Travel, Lifestyle, and How to Invest,” Martin states that the percentage of workers in unions slid from roughly 15% in the mid 1950s to about 10% today. More than that, he says, was the sharp decline in the number of stories, and that, too, contributed to a decrease in labor coverage.

As factory jobs declined, there was a boom in stories about labor, which had not been a priority.”

“Sometime in the 1990s you began to get labor coverage, which had not been a priority.”

By 2010 or so, the labor beat had fallen to a low point: The Washington Post, the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, the Chicago Tribune, and many other daily newspapers no longer had full-time labor beat reporters. (For a while, 1, The New York Times, was the only full-time daily labor beat reporter left.)

After several decades of decline, the labor beat began a slow rebound about a decade ago — a rebound that continues to this day. As the Great Recession unfolded, many editors recognized that the predicament faced by millions of low-wage workers was an important story. Without labor beat reporters, editors often turned to business, economics or general assignment reporters to cover the plight of the unemployed.

F

O R T H E P A S T D E C A D E, Jamieon has written roughly 150 labor stories a year, covering every- thing from the John Deere and teachers’ strikes, to maskless shoppers endangering retail workers, to mass layoffs and workplace safety among warehouse workers during the pandemic, to postal workers dying from Covid-19 outbreaks. Like journalists everywhere, she found that they contracted Covid-19 and how the nation’s fractured unemployment insurance system failed millions of workers laid off during the pandemic.

Another issue reporters are grappling with is what does it mean that white-collar workers are transitioning away from the traditional office and working remotely to the new. “Some time in the 1990s you began to get labor coverage not about union workers, but about what’s going on at McDonald’s, what’s going on at Walmart,” says Nelson Lichtenstein, a long-time labor history professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Concerned about the pandemic’s effects on “essential” workers, Jennifer Gommerman, a writer for The New Yorker who semi-regularly covered criminal justice and urban affairs, decided to do an in-depth profile of a New York City bus driver and the perils he faced. More than 100 New York transit workers have died from Covid. “The class divide in the country became crystal clear,” says Gommerman. “Wealthy people left the city, and white-collars were working from home and Zooming in. Essential workers — bus drivers, nurses, delivery workers, and thousands of others — kept the city going. I felt we really needed to understand their lives.” She profiled Terence Layne, a 45-year-old bus driver, whose father died of Covid-19. Her profile won a National Magazine Award.

When the pandemic hit, everybody became a labor and workplace reporter, says Noam Scheiber, The New York Times’ labor workplace reporter. “If you covered Google or Amazon or Uber or retail or the subways or public sector workers, you became a labor reporter.” Retail reporters like Michael Corkery at The Times, Abha Bhattarai at The Washington Post, and Nathaniel Meyersohn at CNN Business all wrote repeatedly on Covid-19’s impact on workers. There were stories about retailers refusing to require customers to wear masks even though that could endanger their employees, and about CBOs getting huge layoffs while their companies did not give hazard pay to the essential workers who showed up day after day to serve customers.

The pandemic laid bare the harsh reality faced by millions of low-wage workers. Many need more than one job just to afford basic necessities, often lack paid sick days to care for themselves or family members, and typically struggle to find affordable childcare — topics the media has covered with heightened urgency during the pandemic. “One of the striking things about the coronavirus,” says Josh Eidelson, the labor reporter for Bloomberg News and Bloomberg Businessweek, “is how it touched every sort of workplace, in unequal ways and with unequal consequences.” Eidelson’s pandemic stories have included the problems with employer gag rules that prohibit workers from telling their coworkers that they contracted Covid-19 and how the nation’s fractured unemployment insurance system failed millions of workers laid off during the pandemic.

Another issue reporters are grappling with is what does it mean that white-collar workers are transitioning away from the traditional office and working remotely to the new. The Washington Post labor reporter Eli Rosenberg writes, even as workers at some companies return to the office, office life might be the same: Workers describe a strange, changed office environment — a world of complicated social interactions, lingering anxiouvs about masks and vaccinations, and simmering frustrations about inflexible work policies.”
In recent months, the pandemic-inspired boom in labor coverage has grown even bigger for two reasons. First, there has been a surge of strikes and threats to strike at John Deere, Kellogg’s, Nabisco, Kaiser Permanente, and numerous other companies as many workers, after facing considerable risks at their jobs during the pandemic, felt frustrated, unappreciated, and even angry that their employers were not being far more generous in contract negotiations. Second, record numbers of workers have been quitting their jobs in what economists are calling “the Great Resignation.” Labor reporters, economics reporters, and others have rushed to cover this phenomenon: Why are so many workers quitting and what does it mean for the economy, employers, and the nation’s supply chain? There are many reasons to explain why more than 4 million workers have been quitting their jobs each month recently, among them a lack of affordable childcare, but the biggest reason is that the labor shortage in some industries has given millions of workers a welcome opportunity to jump to jobs that pay them more and treat them better.

For labor beat reporters of yesteryear, their agenda was largely set by labor unions: a strike threat against United States Steel or making increased pensions their main contract demand. But today, the agenda is broader and usually set by the reporter, often with a focus on income inequality and injustice. That can mean stories about the pay gap for women, higher unemployment rates for African Americans, the higher fatality rate for Hispanic construction workers, and how a lack of childcare keeps women out of the workforce. “I’ve always seen the beat not so much as union-focused, but one encompassing economic justice and workplace conditions — and about relations between employers and workers,” says Margot Roosevelt, an L.A. Times economics, labor, and workplace reporter. “The issues around inequality are of tremendous interest to our editors up and down the masthead. Any focus on those issues is central to understanding what’s happening in this country today, not just economically, but socially and politically.” As a nod to that reality, some labor reporters have renamed their beat, “labor and workplace reporter.”

Long before the pandemic, the beat was expanding to include many non-union stories like how to deal with bullying bosses, the problems college graduates face finding jobs, farmworkers toiling in 100-degree heat, why Amazon has such a high employee turnover rate, and whether the advent of self-driving cars will throw many Uber and Lyft drivers out of jobs. The labor beat also now includes covering racial disparities and sexual harassment. #MeToo stories are an undeniable type of labor coverage. They’re largely about men harassing or abusing women who work for them — or, as with Harvey Weinstein, women who wanted to be hired by them.

Labor stories can take many forms. Juliana Feliciano Reyes did an unusual labor story for The Philadelphia Inquirer that went viral: why Philadelphia men list their union membership on Tinder. One of the answers, Reyes explained, was they think the good pay and benefits that union workers get will attract potential partners. When Reyes started in the role, the beat and title was “the culture of the workplace,” but over time her coverage reverted to more traditional labor stories.

With an eye to wooing young readers, some editors see a definite upside to workplace coverage. Many young Americans have been inspired by Bernie Sanders and the Fight for $15, have had problems in the job market, and are unionizing, whether they are grad students, museum workers, digital journalists, or more recently, Starbucks baristas. Indeed, a recent Gallup poll found that 77 percent of Americans between 18 and 34 approve of unions, as do 68 percent of all American adults — the highest level in decades.

Many major newspapers and many digital news organizations now have reporters dedicated to the beat. Last April, National Public Radio named Andrea Hsu as its “labor and workplace correspondent.” Beyond the mainstream media, there are reporters covering labor at many progressive and leftist publications, including In These Times, Jacobin, Dissent, the American
“WE NEED 300 MORE LABOR JOURNALISTS, BUT THERE AREN’T JOBS FOR THEM”
SARAH JAFFE, A LEADING LABOR JOURNALIST


Lauren Kaori Gurley, a labor reporter at Vice’s Motherboard since 2019, has probably had more big scoops on the beat than anyone else over the past year. Her scoops include leaked audio of Amazon workers challenging and grappling managers who were attacking unions at an Amazon anti-union meeting and McDonald’s having a secretive intelligence team that spied on workers active in the Fight for $15.

“It’s gotten more competitive,” Gurley says. “There’s a competition for publishing stories first.” There’s also competition to get the highest impact stories. After Amazon denied allegations that its delivery drivers ever peed into bottles, Gurley posted a story about Amazon drivers who did just that. Several drivers used social media to send her photos of their urine-filled bottles and told Gurley that they had to deliver so many Amazon packages each day that they often didn’t have time to find bathrooms. Her story went viral and badly embarrassed Amazon.

As the beat has shifted to focus more on income inequality and power imbalances, some reporters — for instance, Jonah Furman, a writer for Labor Notes — acknowledge that they consider themselves activists as well as journalists. Seeing how powerful and wealthy corporations are and seeing the nation’s immense income inequality, they want not just to write about workers, but to advance their cause. Furman says that his definition of labor journalist “doesn’t fit The New York Times version of labor journalist.” For example, in an article he co-wrote about a threatened strike at Kaiser Permanente, the giant health care provider, he wrote: “Sometimes it’s ‘let’s snuff out any dissent.’ Sometimes it’s ‘let’s surveil every worker.’”

Edward Ongweso Jr. frequently finds himself writing stories about labor even though he is a tech industry reporter at Vice’s Motherboard. Ongweso says lots of important labor stories pop up at tech companies, whether at Amazon, Uber, Google, or video game companies. “Sometimes it’s ‘let’s surveil every worker,’” he says. “Sometimes it’s ‘let’s develop some really repressive union-busting techniques.’”

Despite the increased number of journalists on the beat, some labor reporters say there still aren’t enough people covering the topic, especially in places that aren’t New York City or Washington, D.C. “There’s a lot of coverage still lacking all over the place,” says Jamieson. “There’s a lot less than there was in small and midsized papers.”

Now, social media is helping to fill the gap. Through Twitter especially, reporters can deliver or receive minute-to-minute updates on strikes and other protests across the country. Through a steady stream of tweets as well as some on-the-scene articles, Kim Kelly, who writes a freelance labor column for Teen Vogue, has gotten many journalists far outside of Alabama to pay attention to the strike by more than 1,000 Warrior Met Coal miners that began April 1.

Edward Ongweso Jr. frequently finds himself writing stories about labor even though he is a tech industry reporter at Vice’s Motherboard. Ongweso says lots of important labor stories pop up at tech companies, whether at Amazon, Uber, Google, or video game companies. “Sometimes it’s ‘let’s surveil every worker,’” he says. “Sometimes it’s ‘let’s develop some really repressive union-busting techniques.’”

Martin, the professor at the University of Northern Iowa, is delighted to see the revival, however incomplete, of the labor beat. “It’s good for connecting with people who should care about this organizing drive or this strike or these questions involving workers,” Jaffe says. Now, she often writes for The Progressive and The Nation and co-hosts a podcast, “Belabored,” which is presented by Dissent magazine.

“Sometimes it’s ‘let’s surveil every worker.’”

“I watched too many decent people stripped of their professional dignity,” Kelly continues. “We were watching our colleagues just pushed out the door willy-nilly and without any warning. I get that the newspaper business is in financial crisis. But you don’t take a person with 35 years experience and say you have an hour or [so] to clean out your desk. It’s not right.”

“Sometimes it’s ‘let’s snuff out any dissent.’ Sometimes it’s ‘let’s surveil every worker.’”
Dismayed by the repeated rounds of layoffs, The Record’s newsroom employees (together with journalists at nearby Gannett-owned papers, the Daily Record of Morris County and the New Jersey Herald of Sussex County) voted 59 to 4 to unionize with The NewsGuild in May 2021. The papers were part of a unionization wave that has grown larger since journalists at Gawker Media became, in 2015, the first major digital media company to unionize. In the six years since, spurred by layoffs, increasing workloads, and even the pandemic, more than 100 news organizations have unionized, swelling the ranks of The NewsGuild, which has added about 6,300 new members over the past four years, and the Writers Guild of America, East, which has organized about 2,400 journalists since 2016. For these journalists, unionization has often meant higher minimum salaries, regularly scheduled raises, improved health coverage, greater protections against dismissal, and increased severance pay. The new unions have also pushed to increase diversity in newsrooms and eliminate pay gaps hurting women and minority journalists.

“People see other campaigns winning unionization votes and winning good contracts,” says Jon Schleuss, the NewsGuild’s president. “That has helped this spread like a wildfire, with people asking, ‘Would a union be possible here?’”

Within months of Gawker unionizing, journalists at HuffPost, Salon, Vice Media, and the Guardian US followed suit. By the end of 2018, 30 digital news outlets had unionized, along with what were long seen as the nation’s two most anti-union newspapers, the Los Angeles Times and the Chicago Tribune. The union wave soon swept up several prestigious magazines: The New Yorker, New York, and The New Republic.

Over the past few years, this wave has continued unabated. Journalists at The Atlantic and Forbes voted to unionize, as did over 500 workers from 28 Hearst publications, including Cosmopolitan, Esquire, and Good Housekeeping. Last June, editorial employees at the Insider website (formerly Business Insider) voted to unionize, 241-14, and in November, over 250 employees at Politico received union recognition. Slate, The Intercept, Talking Points Memo, Thrillist, Refinery29, and Chalkbeat, the education website, have also unionized. Writers and producers at The Ringer and Gimlet Media, two podcast giants, have unionized, as have numerous public radio stations, including WBUR in Boston and WHYY in Philadelphia, both of whose workers joined SAG-AFTRA, the giant union for radio, television, and movie workers.

“It’s pretty much ongoing nonstop,” says Nolan. “If anything has changed in the past few years, it’s the conventional wisdom around unions in the media. There was a time when in every conversation about organizing, people felt they were taking a big leap and important things, but regardless of how good your job is, if you’re not working under a contract, you’ll always be at the mercy of your boss if you don’t have a union.”

A big, unexpected factor helped the union effort: Gawker’s founder, Nick Denton — unlike many corporate executives — didn’t mount an anti-union campaign. Rather, Denton said he was “intensely relaxed” about it. In June 2015, Gawker’s employees voted, 80 to 27, to unionize with the Writers Guild. (Gawker Media, which also owned Jezebel, Deadspin, Gizmodo, and Jalopnik, went bankrupt in 2016 after losing a privacy lawsuit to Hulk Hogan.)

Within months of Gawker unionizing, writers and producers at The Ringer and Gimlet Media, two podcast giants, have unionized, as have numerous public radio stations, including WBUR in Boston and WHYY in Philadelphia, both of whose workers joined SAG-AFTRA, the giant union for radio, television, and movie workers. “It’s pretty much ongoing nonstop,” says Nolan. “If anything has changed in the past few years, it’s the conventional wisdom around unions in the media. There was a time when in every conversation about organizing, people felt they were taking a big leap and
they were really going out on a limb, but that has been mitigated to a large degree.

The Writers Guild. They were eager to have a voice on and many of her co-workers to push to unionize with the right to work at home," not just for safety reasons, adds, noting that more journalists “want to push for in the protocols: testing, masking, vaxxing,” Peterson adds, noting that more journalists “want to push for in the protocols: testing, masking, vaxxing,” Peterson writes.

People want to have a voice and a greater desire to unionize toward unions. “People want to have a voice and a greater desire to unionize toward unions. “People want to have a voice and a greater desire to unionize toward unions. “People want to have a voice and a greater desire to unionize toward unions.

Many journalists at Gannett papers have also joined the union wave, prompted by years of layoffs as well as pandemic-related factors have similarly pushed journalists toward unions. “People want to have a voice and a greater desire to unionize toward unions. “People want to have a voice and a greater desire to unionize toward unions. “People want to have a voice and a greater desire to unionize toward unions. “People want to have a voice and a greater desire to unionize toward unions.

The thousands of newly unionized journalists have made some important gains. HuffPost’s current contract sets a $39,338 minimum for reporters starting in February, while The New Yorker’s contract sets a $69,000 minimum according to the NewsGuild-represented employees. The NewsGuild said some employees had been making $42,000. In December, Vice Media’s contract announced a contract year pay increase by the end of 2024. Union contracts for journalists have also prohibited non-disclosure agreements that hide cases in which managers are accused of sexual harassment or discrimination. Many newsroom contracts now have diversity provisions, often similar to the one that The New Yorker agreed to that at least half of the job candidates interviewed for open positions will come from underrepresented groups. And, in an industry with so much turmoil, union negotiators are frequently insisting on success- on success- on success- on success- on success- or. The Intercept’s successor clause, for example, says the union contract shall remain effective in the event the company is sold. The two sides reached an agreement in December, but not long after all 65 members of the Wirecutter union were on strike for five full weeks through Cyber Monday — peak holiday shopping days — and urged consumers to boycott the site. The idea was to hurt The Times’ bottom line because when shoppers click from Amazon to The New York Times or The Washington Post, they pay a 3% commission. (Under federal law, employers are required to cards. (Under federal law, employers are required to cards. (Under federal law, employers are required to cards. (Under federal law, employers are required to cards. (Under federal law, employers are required to cards.

Many workers at Wirecutter were dismayed that it took more than two years to reach an agreement. The union asserted that The Times had intentionally dragged out negotiations (something The Times denied) to discourage a unionization effort by roughly 600 of The Times’ tech workers. But Wirecutter isn’t the only newsroom to experience a long delay. At several out of the way to discourage a unionization effort by roughly 600 of The Times’ tech workers. But Wirecutter isn’t the only newsroom to experience a long delay. At several out of the way to discourage a unionization effort by rough...
IN THE EARLY SUMMER OF 2020, the Black Lives Matter protests unleashed after a Minneapolis police officer murdered George Floyd reached Europe, too. During the protests, people filled the streets and squares across European cities to denounce systemic racism, chanting the popular Black Lives Matter refrain and holding signs that read “We can’t breathe either,” and “This is not an American thing,” as they defaced statues of the continent’s slave traders and colonizers of Africa and the Americas.
These protestors were not only calling out Europe's colonial past — the centuries of subjugating non-white people in distant lands and extracting their resources. They were also taking aim at the racial tensions that have long simmered across the continent as decades of migration from those former colonies have been met with racism and the rise of right-wing, nationalist political parties. About a third of African descendants recently polled by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights said they had been subjected to racial harassment, while 5% said they had been physically attacked. Earlier this year in Germany, politicians of African descent were their campaign posters defaced with racist slurs and received death threats. In March, the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights released a report noting that Portugal has seen a rise in hate crimes and speech targeting people of African descent. The racist abuse aimed at English soccer players following the team's defeat in the Euro 2020 finals this past July is another example of how racial justice remains elusive in Europe.

Despite efforts to integrate minorities and their descendants within what has historically been mainly white societies, racism has often been defined as a uniquely American problem. The lack of diversity in many European newsmakers exacerbates this problem, though some, particularly in the U.K., have started to realize the need to diversify their staff. The reality of its own lack of diversity, the BBC committed to creating a staff that's at least 20% people of color, and other outlets across Europe have tried — at least on paper — to set similar targets. In 2019, Dutch journalist Hadjar Uyangoda created Sulla Razza (About Race) in April 2020 finals this past July is another example of how racial justice remains elusive in Europe.

Despite efforts to integrate minorities and their descendants within what has historically been mainly white societies, racism has often been defined as a uniquely American problem. The lack of diversity in many European newsmakers exacerbates this problem, though some, particularly in the U.K., have started to realize the need to diversify their staff. The reality of its own lack of diversity, the BBC committed to creating a staff that's at least 20% people of color, and other outlets across Europe have tried — at least on paper — to set similar targets. In 2019, Dutch journalist Hadjar Uyangoda created Sulla Razza (About Race) in April 2020.

That the fact that the majority of race podcasts creators in Europe are not journalists is a strength, because what people want to hear now are those who often don't have a "voice," says Rhoda Tchokokam, a member of the Black French artists collective Piment, which ran a live radio show about Black identities in France from 2017 to 2020. "And these platforms are the only resource to achieve this.

In 2019, Tekle met Emmanuelle Maréchal, a French-Cameroonian who had spent time in Italy as a student. Before meeting in person, the pair had been corresponding for some time about the challenges of growing up Black in their respective countries. They discussed the need for all conversations that they realized the importance of sharing their perspective with a larger audience and decided to create a podcast.

Meanwhile, the conversation about the portrayal of minorities on Italian TV was reignited in September when two presenters from Mediaset won an innovation award despite being heavily criticized for the use of the n-word on their prime-time program. Podcasts like Black Coffee fill an important gap in conversations about race. For now, however, most rely on independent outlets for distribution so they can maintain their editorial independence from mainstream outlets — many of which haven't sufficiently grappled with the racial and ethnic disparities that exist in Italy, Tekle and Maréchal crowdfunded Black Coffee, which is available on Apple Podcasts.

More podcasts tackling issues of race in Italy have sprung up recently. Author and journalist Nadeesha Uyangoda created Sulla Razza (About Race) in April 2020 with two co-hosts. Their aim is to explain Anglo-American terms like “tokenism,” “the n-word,” and “whiteness” and discuss their relevance to life in Italy. Through this project, Uyangoda is addressing another issue in Italy that is often overlooked by the mainstream media: the lack of a shared vocabulary to talk about race. Terms like “white privilege” or “colorism,” for example, don't have a translation in Italian. “All the podcasts I listened to were in English,” says Uyangoda. “I wanted to create something in Italian about race, but I noticed the language gap to explain certain topics was often impeding that — because in the Italian language many of these concepts simply do not exist.”

I take the word Black itself, which in Italy is used as a kind of umbrella concept, Uyangoda says. “I'm a brown South Asian, but there’s no term for brown people in Italian. So far these language gaps, which often don't convey just how multifaceted racism is, haven’t been filled by mainstream media,” she adds.

“Twice a month, Uyangoda and her team dissect a new word during the half-hour episode and find alternative, creative ways to translate and adapt them to the Italian context. In their sixth episode, for instance, they introduced their audience to the American expression “model minority,” normally used to refer to Asians and how they are often depicted in media as the “de-livered” immigrant.”
The BLM protests in Germany had an impact on the local media landscape, according to Hasters. She’s noticed more independent podcasts mainly aimed at younger audiences are sprouting up to tackle these issues. Her own work began receiving more recognition. She was invited last year to host the current events podcast of Die Zeit, a national daily newspaper in Hamburg.

“The fact that these are gaining more popularity raises hopes that there will be an interest in getting race talks into mainstream media,” she says.

PODCASTS HAVE BECOME AN IMPORTANT MEDIUM FOR CONTENT CREATORS OUTSIDE OF JOURNALISM TO CONNECT WITH LISTENERS ON ISSUES OF RACE

GERMANY

In Germany, podcasts tackling race issues have been around longer than in Italy, but they also experienced a rise in interest following the BLM protests. Although Germany had a much smaller role than some other European powers in the colonization of Africa, its violent history can’t be erased. In May, the country formally recognized the genocide it committed in the country now known as Namibia in the early 20th century, during which about 75,000 people were killed. The move gave many hope that the protests of the prior year were ushering in concrete change.

In 2016, Alice Hasters, a German-American Black author, and a friend launched Feuer & Brot (Fire & Bread) as a way to bring gender and racial issues into the national conversation in Germany. Since the BLM protests in Germany had an impact on the local media landscape, according to Hasters. She’s noticed more independent podcasts mainly aimed at younger audiences are sprouting up to tackle these issues.

“Even in Italy there’s this idea that some ethnicities are better off and more deserving of acceptance compared to others,” she adds. In the episode, the hosts also tackle the issue of poverty as a cultural phenomenon, where migrants — often from Africa — can be limited to a life of fewer opportunities because of their skin color.

At that time, the podcast landscape in Germany was mainly dominated by white men, so we wanted to bring in a different perspective about topics that weren’t widely tackled in mainstream media, but people had an interest in,” Hasters says. “We chose to speak about something that directly interested us, too, and the two main themes that came up were feminism and racism. We said, ‘Why not explore these two intersect?’”

During each episode, Hasters and co-host Maximiliane Häcke discuss topics like relationship break-ups or what’s it’s like to watch a movie at the theater as a person of color — a perspective to which white people might be unfamiliar.

“Magical Negro,” Hasters and Häcke analyze the stereotype of the friendly, mysterious Black person who magically appears out of nowhere and makes it mission to help the white main character.

“We call this ‘romanticised oppression,’” and we try to help our audience see how, despite their talent, Black people are usually relegated to secondary roles,” Hasters explains. “We dissect the plots of popular movies such as ‘The Green Mile’ or ‘Ghost’ where literally through magical abilities — which sometimes they don’t want to have at all — or through a talent they do not use for themselves, but only to teach others, cinema seems to force the idea that Black people are only there to help white people.”

During the podcast, the pair argues that the film industry has not made as much progress as it claims in including non-white actors through color-blind casting and creating roles specifically for minorities.

France

In France, despite a historically more multicultural society than that of Italy or Germany, the discussion of race and racism remains contentious. The country has a deep-rooted self-perception that it is a color-blind society. Attempts to speak about race and ethnic identity have been hindered by a culture that promotes the idea that French identity supersedes any other background or ethnicity.

But that doesn’t mean racism does not exist in the country. In fact, last year’s protests following the killing of George Floyd resonated across France more than elsewhere in Europe, because of the country’s history of slavery and institutional racism. This is particularly true as it relates to police brutality against citizens with Black or Arab backgrounds in the banlieues, the suburbs around Paris and other large French cities where many immigrants and first- and second-generation French citizens live.

“Magical Negro,” one of France’s most popular podcasts on race — says France’s idea of itself as a color-blind society is based on an arrogant way of not seeing race,” Ly says. “They argue that there’s no difference of race; we’re all just French citizens of one, indivisible republican community. So, when protests last year erupted in France, too, they were simply labeled as a U.S.-imported concept that doesn’t apply to the French or European scenario.”

Ly argues that minorities in France are still invisible in the public space, especially in the media. The collection and computerized storage of race-based statistics is illegal (without individual consent or state waiver) under a 1978 French law, which makes it hard to quantify the lack of media diversity. But 2018 data from the French National Institute for Demographic Studies show that immigrants make up 9.7% of the total French population. That’s more than six million people — about 37% of whom are French citizens.

Every other week, Ly and her co-host, Rokhaya Diallo, a French journalist of West African descent, welcome guests to explore racial issues in everyday life. In a recent episode, they hosted Michaëla Danjé, a musician and activist who spoke about the extra challenges Black people face when transitioning gender. Their program also aims to discuss topics otherwise absent from public discourse, such as the extra burden placed on minorities seeking mental health assistance.

In another episode, the pair dissect the psychological impact systemic racism has on minorities. Throughout the talk with guest Prima Bouvet de la Maisonneuve, an author and psychiatrist who works with patients facing prejudice in their everyday lives, they discuss the emotional toll of racism that often is not publicly recognized.

“This invisible pain” often goes beyond physical, verbal, or institutional discrimination, because it entails a whole range of micro-aggressions that weigh on non-white people. Bouvet de la Maisonneuve explains that minorities, more than white people, have to adjust their behaviors to meet social expectations and dispel harmful stereotypes. “We wanted to address these issues from a personal perspective and needed a common space to talk and find solutions,” Ly says.

Getting to that common space was not easy. Ly and Diallo’s initial pitch was for a TV program on one of the major French broadcast channels. That pitch was rejected multiple times. In some instances, they were asked to soften the proposed topics and change the title, which was considered by some to be too racist. “You cannot use the words ‘your race’ because there’s only one human race;” Ly remembers the proposed changes. Podcasting seemed like the only platform that would allow them the editorial independence they sought. Produced by Radio Audéo, one of France’s many podcast platforms, Kiffe ta Race officially launched in 2018; today, it’s in its third season with about 160,000 listeners per episode.

Ly thinks this interest came as a result of the combination of the rise of nationalism in Europe as well as the killing of George Floyd in the U.S., which reminded them of their own episodes of police brutality. In July 2016, Adama Traoré, a 24-year-old man of Malian origin, died while in police custody in a Paris banlieue. His death was officially ruled the result of heart failure, but an independent autopsy done at the request of Traoré’s family says he was asphyxiated similar to Floyd. The protests in the summer of 2020 became an opportunity for France to confront its own episodes of racial violence and gave Kiffe ta Race fresh relevance.

“It’s thanks to podcasts that these conversations are becoming more accessible and are slowly changing the perspective of French people on local episodes of racism and police brutality, showing there could be a chance one day to bring them to mainstream media,” Ly says, proving that there’s an interest from listeners.
STANDING GUARD IN INDIA

The last few bastions of the free press are holding the Modi government to account

BY VIDYA KRISHNAN
Indian journalists are painfully aware of the elemen-
tal rage directed at them by the government as well as by audiences. Many journalists, including myself, spent most of July 16–17 receiving death threats with warnings of a “similar fate,” awaiting us.

India’s media universe is vast, with over 17,000 newspa-
papers, 100,000 magazines, 750 television news chan-
els, and countless websites in dozens of languages. Under Modi, this vast media landscape has been exposed to every kind of attack — editors are threatened, advertis-
ing out off, tax investigations launched, police violence perpetrated against reporters, ambushed by the ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)’s politi-
cal supporters, and reprisals from corrupt local officials. The coordinated hate campaigns, launched by BJP’s troll armies, are foundational to the systematic assault on truth in India. Discrediting and harassing journalists, es-
pically women, is central to how the Modi government operates, with severe paranoia and vindictive cruelty.

Over the past seven years, India’s legacy media orga-
nizations have caved under pressure, and low-resource newsrooms with small, multitasking teams — like The Caravan, Scroll, and The Wire — have found themselves in the trenches, holding the government to account, es-
pically now during the pandemic.

India, where the free press has played a crucial role in protecting democratic insti-
tutions since independence in 1947, is now one of the world’s most dangerous countries for jour-
alisits. Hindu nationalist Prime Minister Narendra Modi has launched an unparalleled assault on truth, with the free press cast as the enemy of the state.

The response to the death of Indian photojournalist Danish Siddiqui is a case in point.

On July 16, 2021, Siddiqui was killed by Taliban terrorists in Kandahar, Afghanistan. He was covering the clash between Afghan special forces and Taliban fighters for Reuters. At 38, he had already won a Pulitzer Prize for Feature Photography for document-
ing Myanmar’s Rohingya refugee crisis. His colleagues described him as “a man who
cared deeply about the stories he covered.” Condolesces poured in from around the world, with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, the U.S. State Department, and United Nations secretary general António Guterres expressing grief at the tragic news.

Modi chose not to acknowledge Siddiqui’s death. Meanwhile, the prime minister’s followers called Siddiqui — an Indian Muslim murdered by the Taliban — a “jihadi.”

Indian journalists are painfully aware of the elemen-
tal rage directed at them by the government as well as by audiences. Many journalists, including myself, spent most of July 16–17 receiving death threats with warnings of a “similar fate,” awaiting us.

India’s media universe is vast, with over 17,000 newspa-
papers, 100,000 magazines, 750 television news chan-
els, and countless websites in dozens of languages. Under Modi, this vast media landscape has been exposed to every kind of attack — editors are threatened, advertis-
ing out off, tax investigations launched, police violence perpetrated against reporters, ambushed by the ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)’s politi-
cal supporters, and reprisals from corrupt local officials. The coordinated hate campaigns, launched by BJP’s troll armies, are foundational to the systematic assault on truth in India. Discrediting and harassing journalists, es-
pically women, is central to how the Modi government operates, with severe paranoia and vindictive cruelty.

Over the past seven years, India’s legacy media orga-
nizations have caved under pressure, and low-resource newsrooms with small, multitasking teams — like The Caravan, Scroll, and The Wire — have found themselves in the trenches, holding the government to account, es-
pically now during the pandemic.

The changing political mood has meant that audi-
ses of a “similar fate” awaiting us.

While the prime minister’s followers called Siddiqui — an Indian Muslim murdered by the Taliban — a “jihadi.”

Indian journalists are painfully aware of the elemen-
tal rage directed at them by the government as well as by audiences. Many journalists, including myself, spent most of July 16–17 receiving death threats with warnings of a “similar fate,” awaiting us.

India’s media universe is vast, with over 17,000 newspa-
papers, 100,000 magazines, 750 television news chan-
els, and countless websites in dozens of languages. Under Modi, this vast media landscape has been exposed to every kind of attack — editors are threatened, advertis-
ing out off, tax investigations launched, police violence perpetrated against reporters, ambushed by the ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)’s politi-
cal supporters, and reprisals from corrupt local officials. The coordinated hate campaigns, launched by BJP’s troll armies, are foundational to the systematic assault on truth in India. Discrediting and harassing journalists, es-
pically women, is central to how the Modi government operates, with severe paranoia and vindictive cruelty.

Over the past seven years, India’s legacy media orga-
nizations have caved under pressure, and low-resource newsrooms with small, multitasking teams — like The Caravan, Scroll, and The Wire — have found themselves in the trenches, holding the government to account, es-
pically now during the pandemic.

The changing political mood has meant that audi-
ses of a “similar fate” awaiting us.

While the prime minister’s followers called Siddiqui — an Indian Muslim murdered by the Taliban — a “jihadi.”

Indian journalists are painfully aware of the elemen-
tal rage directed at them by the government as well as by audiences. Many journalists, including myself, spent most of July 16–17 receiving death threats with warnings of a “similar fate,” awaiting us.

India’s media universe is vast, with over 17,000 newspa-
papers, 100,000 magazines, 750 television news chan-
els, and countless websites in dozens of languages. Under Modi, this vast media landscape has been exposed to every kind of attack — editors are threatened, advertis-
ing out off, tax investigations launched, police violence perpetrated against reporters, ambushed by the ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)’s politi-
cal supporters, and reprisals from corrupt local officials. The coordinated hate campaigns, launched by BJP’s troll armies, are foundational to the systematic assault on truth in India. Discrediting and harassing journalists, es-
pically women, is central to how the Modi government operates, with severe paranoia and vindictive cruelty.

Over the past seven years, India’s legacy media orga-
nizations have caved under pressure, and low-resource newsrooms with small, multitasking teams — like The Caravan, Scroll, and The Wire — have found themselves in the trenches, holding the government to account, es-
pically now during the pandemic.

The changing political mood has meant that audi-
ses of a “similar fate” awaiting us.

While the prime minister’s followers called Siddiqui — an Indian Muslim murdered by the Taliban — a “jihadi.”

Indian journalists are painfully aware of the elemen-
tal rage directed at them by the government as well as by audiences. Many journalists, including myself, spent most of July 16–17 receiving death threats with warnings of a “similar fate,” awaiting us.

India’s media universe is vast, with over 17,000 newspa-
papers, 100,000 magazines, 750 television news chan-
els, and countless websites in dozens of languages. Under Modi, this vast media landscape has been exposed to every kind of attack — editors are threatened, advertis-
ing out off, tax investigations launched, police violence perpetrated against reporters, ambushed by the ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)’s politi-
cal supporters, and reprisals from corrupt local officials. The coordinated hate campaigns, launched by BJP’s troll armies, are foundational to the systematic assault on truth in India. Discrediting and harassing journalists, es-
pically women, is central to how the Modi government operates, with severe paranoia and vindictive cruelty.

Over the past seven years, India’s legacy media orga-
nizations have caved under pressure, and low-resource newsrooms with small, multitasking teams — like The Caravan, Scroll, and The Wire — have found themselves in the trenches, holding the government to account, es-
pically now during the pandemic.

The changing political mood has meant that audi-
ses of a “similar fate” awaiting us.

While the prime minister’s followers called Siddiqui — an Indian Muslim murdered by the Taliban — a “jihadi.”

Indian journalists are painfully aware of the elemen-
tal rage directed at them by the government as well as by audiences. Many journalists, including myself, spent most of July 16–17 receiving death threats with warnings of a “similar fate,” awaiting us.

India’s media universe is vast, with over 17,000 newspa-
papers, 100,000 magazines, 750 television news chan-
els, and countless websites in dozens of languages. Under Modi, this vast media landscape has been exposed to every kind of attack — editors are threatened, advertis-
ing out off, tax investigations launched, police violence perpetrated against reporters, ambushed by the ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)’s politi-
cal supporters, and reprisals from corrupt local officials. The coordinated hate campaigns, launched by BJP’s troll armies, are foundational to the systematic assault on truth in India. Discrediting and harassing journalists, es-
pically women, is central to how the Modi government operates, with severe paranoia and vindictive cruelty.

Over the past seven years, India’s legacy media orga-
nizations have caved under pressure, and low-resource newsrooms with small, multitasking teams — like The Caravan, Scroll, and The Wire — have found themselves in the trenches, holding the government to account, es-
pically now during the pandemic.

The changing political mood has meant that audi-
ses of a “similar fate” awaiting us.

While the prime minister’s followers called Siddiqui — an Indian Muslim murdered by the Taliban — a “jihadi.”

Indian journalists are painfully aware of the elemen-
tal rage directed at them by the government as well as by audiences. Many journalists, including myself, spent most of July 16–17 receiving death threats with warnings of a “similar fate,” awaiting us.

India’s media universe is vast, with over 17,000 newspa-
papers, 100,000 magazines, 750 television news chan-
els, and countless websites in dozens of languages. Under Modi, this vast media landscape has been exposed to every kind of attack — editors are threatened, advertis-
ing out off, tax investigations launched, police violence perpetrated against reporters, ambushed by the ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)’s politi-
cal supporters, and reprisals from corrupt local officials. The coordinated hate campaigns, launched by BJP’s troll armies, are foundational to the systematic assault on truth in India. Discrediting and harassing journalists, es-
pically women, is central to how the Modi government operates, with severe paranoia and vindictive cruelty.

Over the past seven years, India’s legacy media orga-
nizations have caved under pressure, and low-resource newsrooms with small, multitasking teams — like The Caravan, Scroll, and The Wire — have found themselves in the trenches, holding the government to account, es-
pically now during the pandemic.

The changing political mood has meant that audi-
ses of a “similar fate” awaiting us.
Parallel to the destruction brought on by the pandemic, the Modi administration has tightened its chokehold on the media. “Criminal prosecutions are meanwhile often used to gag journalists critical of the authorities,” notes the latest update on press freedom by Reporters Without Borders. “In 2020, the government took advantage of the coronavirus crisis to step up its control of news coverage by prosecuting journalists providing information at variance with the official position. The situation is still very worrying in Kashmir, where reporters are often harassed by police and paramilitaries and must cope with utterly Orwellian content regulations, and where media outlets are liable to be closed, as was the case with the valley’s leading daily, the Kashmir Times.”

The fears journalists had — of being spied on, targeted systematically by extrajudicial measures — were confirmed following a series of reports by the Pegasus Project, an international investigative series that revealed governments’ espionage on journalists, opposition politicians, activists, business people, and others using the private spyware developed by the Israeli technology and cyberarms firm NSO Group. Journalists, particularly those based in Delhi, were primary targets of surveillance. In all, over 40 journalists, two ministers, a Supreme Court judge, and three opposition leaders’ names have emerged as targets. Following these revelations, Modi’s government stands accused of treason and “unforgivable sacrilege” by Rahul Gandhi, India’s most prominent political opposition figure, who was also targeted by NSO Group’s surveillance software, according to the Pegasus reporting.

Modi has never been more unpopular than he is right now, as evidenced by his party’s loss in recent elections in West Bengal, India’s fourth-most populous state. India Today’s latest Mood of the Nation Survey found that Modi’s popularity had dipped from a low 38% in January to an even lower 24% in August. Troll farms, on- and offline, try to fight this political swing and in the process have brought India to the edge of a post-truth abyss where facts matter less and emotions — and political affiliations — matter more in shaping the discourse.

A 2018 report on state-sponsored trolling noted that the BJP IT cell, a mix of volunteer and paid amateur trolls, is similar to China’s “50 Cent Army” — people paid nominal sums to spread nationalistic propaganda — and tasked with targeting “a hit list” of mainstream journalists.

Reporting the changing mood of Indian voters who have suffered economic, humanitarian, and deeply personal tragedies under Modi’s leadership seems to be journalism’s primary crime.

But India has changed. Our families, communities, and cities are devastated. Journalists are dead, and those who haven’t died continue to report on the devastation. In Modi’s India, if Danish Siddiqui is a “jihadi,” then I am one, too. If our readers cannot tell the difference between hacks who have sold their reputations and ones who are taking bullets from terrorists in the line of duty, they lose their right to comment on the state of media.

A photojournalist observes Indian paramilitary soldiers patrolling a vandalized street in February 2020. In the past year, reporting has become a riskier task for journalists in India.

DURING THE DARKEST MONTHS OF INDIA’S DEVASTATING SECOND WAVE, BETWEEN MARCH AND MAY OF 2021, COVID-19 WAS KILLING THREE JOURNALISTS A DAY

Reporting the changing mood of Indian voters who have suffered economic, humanitarian, and deeply personal tragedies under Modi’s leadership seems to be journalism’s primary crime.

But India has changed. Our families, communities, and cities are devastated. Journalists are dead, and those who haven’t died continue to report on the devastation. In Modi’s India, if Danish Siddiqui is a “jihadi,” then I am one, too. If our readers cannot tell the difference between hacks who have sold their reputations and ones who are taking bullets from terrorists in the line of duty, they lose their right to comment on the state of media.

A 2018 report on state-sponsored trolling noted that the BJP IT cell, a mix of volunteer and paid amateur trolls, is similar to China’s “50 Cent Army” — people paid nominal sums to spread nationalistic propaganda — and tasked with targeting “a hit list” of mainstream journalists.

Audiences will decide the winner in the fight between the last few bastions of the free press and an increasingly authoritarian Modi administration.

The denial of facts, of changing realities of India, is the audience’s gravest offence against itself; it maximizes hatred and minimizes reason. A moral stand by readers — like those who have stepped up to support the independent reporting of outlets like The Wire and The Caravan — is the only defense against the Modi administration’s regulatory capture of India’s democratic institutions.

There is no other stand.
When soldiers finally swarmed the offices of Mizzima Media in March, the building was empty. Its editors had already taken the computers, cameras, microphones, and notes and vanished into different corners of Myanmar. It had taken weeks for the new junta to blacklist them, but the staff had begun packing on day one.

“We were, in our minds, always thinking, ‘One day the military will come back,’” says editor-in-chief and managing director Soe Myint.

Soe Myint had seen it all some 30 years before, when decades of resentment against Myanmar’s socialist dictatorship finally ignited on Aug. 8, 1988. The 8888 Uprising, as the widespread, pro-democracy protests came to be known, led to the collapse of the government, but in its place rose a military surveillance state that kept democracy champion Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest and brutally snuffed out any dissent.

“Exile is in our DNA,” says Soe Myint, who is currently in hiding. “The military wanted to destroy us, wanted to kill us. We are still alive. Alive and better than ever.”

And yet, while the old regime stifled the free press swiftly and decisively, Myanmar has a new generation of journalists and independent publications, and the new junta seems uncertain about what to do with them. It banned some media outlets yet left others alone, seemingly at random. It has arrested four foreign journalists (two of whom have since been released) so far, but most journalists and independent publications, and the new junta seems uncertain about what to do with them.

Mratt’s network of colleagues and amateur stringers do phone interviews using burner SIM cards and then find a working fiber connection to send their notes, using a VPN and an encrypted messenger like Signal or WhatsApp. The system works, but it’s unreliable and makes even simple fact-checking a grind.

Worse, people are reluctant to speak with journalists — or even stand near one on the street — as they are terrified of being arrested in the night after some reporter posts their photo to Facebook or Twitter. “If you post something online or do a live stream on Facebook, people will say you’re giving information to the military,” Mratt says. “So, you have to take pictures and ask questions very secretly.”

One major publication, which has gone underground, published a photo of members of a newly formed resistance group. Their faces were blurred, but police were able to identify the hotel in the background. Since then, published a photo of members of a newly formed resistance group.

As disappearances and nightly arrests — now capped by the words “junta,” “regime,” and “coup” — on the record — that if they enforced that rule there would be no media left.

“Honestly, I have no idea what will happen,” says freelance journalist Mratt Kyaw Thu. “It’s like an apocalypse for the media.”

Mratt, who became a reporter in 2010, was among those charged with “spreading news to affect State stability.”

“I wrote about what would happen if communications staff joined CDM,” he explains, referencing the nationwide Civil Disobedience Movement. “I spoke about how the whole broadcast [system] would collapse.” At the time of the interview, Mratt was sheltering with an assistant group. Their faces were blurred, but police were able to identify the hotel in the background. Troops raided it the next day. On social media, the publication published a photo of members of a newly formed resistance group. Their faces were blurred, but police were able to identify the hotel in the background. Troops raided it the next day. On social media, the publication was branded an “informer” — a new slur for spies and journalists alike. “It’s the same as in the ‘90s, except in the ‘90s, not even one person dared to talk to us,” says Than Lwin Htun, Burmese service chief for U.S.-funded news service Voice of America.

As disappearances and nightly arrests — now captured and documented on social media — resumed, protests make a three-finger salute during a demonstration against the military coup. People have been wary even to stand near journalists for fear of government reprisals.

An election was held in 2010, and for a brief time it seemed Myanmar had finally achieved democracy. But in February 2021, the military reclaimed power. Police rounded up journalists by the dozens and forced them to sign agreements not to cover the protests, and the new junta revoked the licenses of five major outlets. A few simply closed, but others continued to publish underground.

“ln the DNA,” says Soe Myint, who is currently in hiding. “The military wanted to destroy us, wanted to kill us. We are still alive. Alive and better than ever.”

And yet, while the old regime stifled the free press swiftly and decisively, Myanmar has a new generation of journalists and independent publications, and the new junta seems uncertain about what to do with them. It banned some media outlets yet left others alone, seemingly at random. It has arrested four foreign journalists (two of whom have since been released) so far, but most international outlets haven’t been publicly denounced. It shut down cellular data but fiber connections, though restricted, remain open, allowing citizen reporters to circulate information and photos online. It outlawed taking photos, using a VPN and an encrypted messenger like Signal or WhatsApp. The system works, but it’s unreliable and makes even simple fact-checking a grind.

Worse, people are reluctant to speak with journalists — or even stand near one on the street — as they are terrified of being arrested in the night after some reporter posts their photo to Facebook or Twitter. “If you post something online or do a live stream on Facebook, people will say you’re giving information to the military,” Mratt says. “So, you have to take pictures and ask questions very secretly.”

One major publication, which has gone underground, published a photo of members of a newly formed resistance group. Their faces were blurred, but police were able to identify the hotel in the background. Troops raided it the next day. On social media, the publication was branded an “informer” — a new slur for spies and journalists alike. “It’s the same as in the ‘90s, except in the ‘90s, not even one person dared to talk to us,” says Than Lwin Htun, Burmese service chief for U.S.-funded news service Voice of America.

As disappearances and nightly arrests — now captured and documented on social media — resumed,
Than Lwin Htn, who is based in Washington, D.C., is determined to protect VOA’s sources. But avoiding the “activist” label is more complicated than simply masking faces and withholding names. Just attending military press conferences, which Than Lwin Htn insists his team do, has drawn the ire of activists and other journalists.

“Most of the young journalists now, they hate the military. They are in a boycott mood. They don’t want to seek any interviews,” he says. “They say, ‘Why should I be fair against this brutal military?’ They are ready to pick up on anything given by the opposition side. For example, somebody says the military shot and killed 80 people on the street, they don’t want to verify. They are not hesitant to write straight away.”

He doesn’t blame them. As of Jan. 13, 115 journalists had been arrested and 24 were still in detention. Fifteen were formally charged, with five of them released. After initially facing deportation, three reporters who fled to neighboring Thailand are now in a third country where they are safe.

It is hard to remain objective and do due diligence when your friends and colleagues are being arrested and you could be next. Yet fairness and objectivity are about self-preservation as much as duty, according to Than Lwin Htn.

“It would be very disgraceful to be kicked out because of some mistake we should have avoided,” he says. In 2006, when an established contact had a source claim a storm wiped out a掸邦北部的村庄, VOA couldn’t get official confirmation. But the source was strong — allegedly a relative of a victim — so they ran the report.

The next morning, Than Lwin Htn says photos were published in multiple outlets of the supposedly devastated village under the headline “VOA fabricates news.” Even in exile, Swe Win, editor-in-chief of Myanmar News, says his team against “activist journalism.”

“As an example, the Swe Win sounds more like a professor than an editor, using terms like “universities of humanity” to describe objectivity and shared experiences. He developed his philosophy in prison, where he spent seven years after being “caught red-handed with a stack of subversive leaflets” in 1998, he says.

“As long as your work is based on truth, you can still contribute to the fight for political causes. But the resistance must be based on truth,” he says.

In the past, journalism was its activist trappings. When the National League for Democracy (NLD) took power in 2015, it could do no wrong in the eyes of the press. But as the honeymoon phase ended, it simply shunned or became actively hostile to the media.

In some cases, Aung San Suu Kyi appeared to tolerate police suppression. “You are fighting a monster, but you can also easily become a monster,” says Swe Win.

Soe Myint agrees with Swe Win’s criticisms, but he doesn’t tell his staff to avoid activist journalism. He finds the entire discussion absurd. “I have never understood the term ‘activist journalism,’ which is simply not used in the West,” Soe Myint says. “If someone is fighting for freedom, and you call that ‘activism,’ then it may be activism. You need to fight for it.”

In 1988, while photographing demonstrations for an underground student paper, a soldier took Soe Myint’s camera after shoving him into an armored truck, where he watched peaceful protesters get moved down, even children in their school uniforms. “I saw the killings all day, from morning until night,” he says. “The next day I left for the border to take cover.”

He received military training from ethnic Karen rebel planning to help overthrow the junta with weapons. “I wanted to become a monster,” he says. “But I realized that something went wrong.”

Soe Myint, taking up arms and founding a magazine were both acts of rebellion in a fight that never really ended; even when the military regime was overthrown by the army, he was arrested and finally freed in November. “It would be very easy against this brutal military,” he says. “But you can’t comply with that, he declares: “You are not a journalist.”

But reporter Su — who requested anonymity for personal safety — believes the crisis could actually inspire the next generation of Myanmar journalists. “Many journalists have become refugees,” he says, “and now they want to know the news because they want democracy.”

“Before, many youths were not interested in the news, but now they want to know the news because they want democracy,” Su says.

One of Su’s volunteer colleagues is Ya — also not this person’s real name — who had barely read a news article in her life. “I wanted to become a monster,” she says. “But I realized that something went wrong.”

Soe Myint says: “We want to remain on the surface. We don’t want to go underground. We don’t have exile DNA.”

“I don’t have exile DNA”. Soe Myint says: “We want to remain on the surface. We don’t want to go underground. We don’t have exile DNA.”

Since the interview with Swe Win, Frontier managing editor Danny Fenster, an American, was arrested at Yangon International Airport. “We do not know why Danny was detained and have not been able to contact him. We are concerned for his wellbeing and call for his immediate release,” a statement from the magazine read.

Even if the industry survives, nobody is quite sure what its future will be. Soe Myint predicts a stark divide between professional journalists and state propaganda, with nothing in between. Than Lwin Htn sees the emergence of a tightly-controlled digital space akin to China’s Great Firewall. Soe Myint says the real threat is simple economics: Even before the coup few news outlets were profitable, reporters were under-trained and underpaid, and the pandemic had pushed the industry to the brink.

But reporter Su — who requested anonymity for personal safety — believes the crisis could actually inspire the next generation of reporters, as the 8888 Uprising inspired veterans like Soe Myint. Su got into journalism not to fight an oppressive regime, but because they thought journalist meant “police intelligence.” “I watched Charlie’s Angels, Angelina Jolie movies, so many spy movies. I wanted to become one of them.”

Now, targeted by the military and shunned by the public, Su and colleagues have come to rely on grassroots networks of young amateurs who set up social media groups to exchange information on the protests and police crackdowns. Soon they began funnelling this information to professional reporters, protecting themselves with VPN connections and single-use SIM cards.

Trusted by their local communities, but also too obvious to be targeted by police, “these citizen journalists” may define the next era of Myanmar press. But the future generation has little hope of joining in.

“We have lost quite what it was in the Global North, at least they didn’t have to worry about being dragged out of their apartments at night for what they published. Their generation isn’t fighting for a distant dream. They have that dream, and now they want it back.”

“Before, many youths were not interested in the news, but now they want to know the news because they want democracy,” Su says.

Until then, Ya will have to learn on the job.

“Of course, I’m afraid of being arrested. I’ve nearly been arrested,” Ya says. “But if I don’t do this, our news won’t reach the media. No one will know what is happening in our country.”

Myanmar journalists
take cover during a protest against the military coup in central Yangon in May 2021. Some believe the crisis could inspire a new generation of journalists.
since 1973, Roe v. Wade — the Supreme Court’s landmark decision — has been a household name for many Americans. Less known to the public, however, is the woman behind the case: Norma McCorvey, who assumed the pseudonym Jane Roe in front of the court. Joshua Prager, ‘NP’ 11, set out to tell McCorvey’s story in his new book, “The Family Roe: An American Story,” published by W.W. Norton in September. With over a decade of research and hundreds of hours of interviews with McCorvey, Prager reveals in great detail McCorvey’s unwanted pregnancy, her oscillating presence in both the pro-choice and pro-life movements, and her complex role as the face of Roe. And for the first time, the public hears from the three daughters McCorvey gave up to adoption, including “the Roe baby,” whom McCorvey gave birth to before the court arrived at its decision.

Prager’s book is timely. In September, just as “The Family Roe” hit bookshelves, a legal battle ensued in Texas after the state legislature effectively banned abortions starting at six weeks of pregnancy. At the national level, the Supreme Court has heard arguments on a Mississippi abortion ban — and, with a conservative majority on the court, Roe sits in a precarious position. McCorvey and her children are not the only ones deeply impacted by Roe and its aftermath, Prager told Nieman Reports.

“With over 700 pages, “The Family Roe” is nuanced and complex — an approach that stems from Prager’s journalistica backgound,” Prager said. “I did not write this book as an advocate. I write it as a journalist. And what motivated me above all, was being honest and fair, and treating my subjects with empathy.”

Anjuli Sastry has launched “Where We Come From,” the project she researched as a 2021 Visiting Nieman Fellow. As creator and producer of the audio and video series, she invited immigrant communities of color to tell their own stories through oral histories and intergenerational conversations with family, friends, and experts.

Valeria Fernandez has launched “Comadres de Allí,” a Spanish-language podcast she created with her colleague Maritza L. Félix, designed to address women’s health issues in Latinx immigrant communities in the U.S. and reach those who don’t have internet access.


Dave Mayers, is a producer and cinematographer for “Vice News Tonight.” The series won the Emmy for outstanding newscast. MS

Interviewing Jane Roe
Joshua Prager’s new book tells the story of the woman behind the Supreme Court case

“There’s the larger family [in the book] as well, and what I mean by that is the tens of millions of people in this country who are connected in some very organic way to the issue of abortion in America.”

Joshua Prager spent hundreds of hours with Norma McCorvey for “The Family Roe”
I was not the Caracas my sisters and I grew up in. Instead, due to my family’s relative privilege, it was one that we mainly experienced through car windows or from behind tall fences wrapped in barbed wire. In 2017, I returned to a city that mostly just felt empty and abandoned. Hoping to reconnect with Caracas after so many years away, I decided to take up running. I’d lace up my shoes and hit the pavement shortly after sunrise, and suddenly, I could run confidently past the streets I had been told to stay away from as a child. The city that I loved and belonged to but had somehow felt so distant started growing around me, one kilometer at a time.

For most of my life, I felt like a passive victim of the seismic political shifts that had shaped my country. And just like running allowed me to regain ownership over my own city, journalism has helped me to regain power over my own story. Being a reporter gave me the power to actively witness and reveal what once felt disempowering. In his book “The Politics of Storytelling,” Harvard Divinity School Professor Michael D. Jackson describes storytelling as giving us a sense that even though we do not exactly determine the course of our lives, we can at least have a hand in defining their meaning.

I found meaning, agency, and purpose in reporting on Venezuela and its people: the pregnant women navigating a broken health care system, the growing tribes of street kids flooding the city streets, and the surreality of a booming luxury dollar market as hunger gnawed away at vast portions of the population.

Yet as Bloomberg’s Bureau Chief, I belonged to a privileged group of correspondents who could earn thousands of dollars a month for reporting on Venezuela for international media. The average local journalist working for an independent outlet would be lucky to make a couple hundred dollars over the same period.

During my time as a Nieman fellow, I want to think more deeply about how the pregnant women navigating a broken health care system, the growing tribes of street kids flooding the city streets, and the surreality of a booming luxury dollar market as hunger gnawed away at vast portions of the population.

Finding meaning, agency, and purpose in reporting from my home country of Venezuela

BY PATRICIA LAYA

Covering Covid-19 and Connecting with Sources in Quiet Moments

“When I am creating portraits of someone, I like to ask them to take me to places that mean something to them. Cemeteries are sacred ground, and it was special to me to be able to have Latasha offer to show me where her family was buried. It was a peaceful but very emotional time we shared reflecting on what she has been through in the pandemic.”

Bethany Mollenkof, photojournalist and 2021 Nieman Visiting Fellow, on photographing the devastation the coronavirus is bringing to southern and rural Black communities.

Latasha Taylor visits in April 2021 the cemetery in Cathcart, Georgia, where her mother, aunt, and uncle — all of whom succumbed to Covid-19 — are buried.

I was helplessly watching my country’s demise and desperately wanted to be in the middle of it.
MEAT PACKING
Covid ripped through a Tyson pork plant in Iowa

WFH
More people than ever are working from home

AMAZON
The online giant has a high employee turnover rate

FARMING
Conditions for farmworkers are under scrutiny

SCHOOL
The pandemic poses questions for teachers and parents

OUT OF OFFICE
When will white-collar workers return?

RETAIL
Workers in public-facing jobs face new health risks

From COVID-19 to the #MeToo movement, workplace coverage is resurgent

STARBUCKS
Baristas in Buffalo and beyond are unionizing