FIGHTING FOR A FREE PRESS IN UKRAINE — AND BEYOND

To promote and elevate the standards of journalism,

The Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University

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George Keburia says goodbye to his wife, Maya, and children as they board a train to Lviv at the Odessa train station in Odessa, Ukraine

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Dr. Ashish Jha on Bracing for the Pandemic’s Third Year

The leading public health expert discusses the press’ role in relaying public health directives, combating misinformation, and more

By the spring of 2021, one year into the pandemic, a return to normalcy seemed near. Vaccines were becoming more available in the U.S. and masking and social distancing restrictions were loosened soon after. By the end of the summer, however, the Delta variant had run rampant across the globe; Omicron soon would follow. Heading into the pandemic’s third year, new questions loom: What new variants await us? How can vaccines be equitably distributed worldwide? And at what point will the coronavirus become endemic?

From the pandemic’s start, Dr. Ashish Jha has reflected on these questions and more. An expert on pandemic preparedness, Jha has offered guidance to state and federal policymakers on Covid-19. Recently appointed as the U.S. Covid-19 response coordinator, Jha is also dean of Brown’s School of Public Health and professor of health policy at the Harvard Medical School. His research has appeared in over 200 publications. Jha spoke with the Nieman Foundation in February about the press’ role in relaying public health directives, misinformation, and more. Edited excerpts.

On finding a middle ground on policy

I spent much of the acute phase of this pandemic [as] lasting about 18 months and that the major disruption to our lives was going to last about that long. My mental model was [that] at about 18 months in, we’d have pretty good vaccines. They’d also be widely available. And sometime by the summer of 2021, we would be in much better shape. I looked like a genius in the spring of 2021 and then like an idiot by the fall of 2021.

For instance, I have no idea whether Omicron is going to be the last clinically and public health-wise important variant. I suspect it’s not. I suspect we will get to know many more letters of the Greek alphabet. Those variants may look very different than Omicron.

Acknowledging that is the future we have to understand and prepare for [and] speaking openly and honestly about those kinds of things is extremely important.

I don’t know that I see a lot of that in journalism. There are some good pieces. It’s not that that’s not happening.

That kind of thing has become a large part of journalism with Covid [as], “the latest cases are down 10,000. We’re heading towards endemic.” The longer pieces that provide that broader context, there are people writing it.

Those are the things that need to be done more to help people understand that yes, infection numbers will come down. They will go back up. That’s not the most important thing that people need to understand.

The bigger picture is helping people understand the long arc of the pandemic and where we are in that arc.

On misinformation

Obviously, misinformation has been a huge problem in the United States throughout the pandemic. One thing I always reminded of is [that] Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube also exist in Europe. Misinformation has really come home to roost.

Then the question is why are the Europeans so much less susceptible to misinformation? Is it because they’re not susceptible at all. We see the rules and the anti-vax movement, but they’re just much smaller as far as I can see, certainly by the evidence. In Europe, it’s much clearer.

I look at places, for instance, like Puerto Rico in the United States — phenomenal vaccinations. Just amazing vaccinations. Early and sustained. Then, we try to dig into why. Are they wealthy? No, they’re not all that wealthy. Did they have early access? No. They accessed at about the same time, maybe even a little bit later.

One of the things that is going on is if you look at the major political parties in Puerto Rico, they’re all very pro-vaccine. They fight about all sorts of other stuff, statehood, now, a bunch of other issues. As far as I can tell, the political parties are largely all fully aligned on vaccines. That is not true, in many ways, on the U.S. mainland.

My best sense of this is that most people, as much as they may say they’re doing their own research, really are not doing their own research.

What I mean by that is, what do their political leaders that they trust say? Other people whose opinions they value and factual are they saying about these vaccines? When you have both vaccines and masks pretty politicized … I will tell you, I’ve been disappointed.

There are plenty of Republicans who’ve been terrific on vaccines. Still, [there are] a lot of Republican leaders who played footsie, as it goes, with a lot of anti-vax folks. Not really condemning it, kind of tolerating it, and signaling that they’re actually not that strongly pro-vaccine. That has really caused huge problems.

There is also one other issue that is not at all trivial, which is there are large chunks of the American population, largely racial ethnic minorities, who have had a long history of distrust of the government, for good reason, in the way that they have been treated.

In that context, misinformation about vaccines and other pandemic stuff has also found fertile ground, and that also continues to be a challenge. This is something I struggle with and think about all the time. How do we understand the misinformation that’s killing us?

Almost everybody who’s dying right now is dying because of misinformation. If every adult had gotten vaccinated and boosted, [we’d] have close to no deaths or a very small number of deaths from Covid.

On moving away from predictions

The one feature of this pandemic has been that everybody who has made predictions has been wrong. It’s been really hard to predict all the twists and turns of this pandemic.

I expected more variants. I don’t know that I saw Omicron and its features coming because it was a little bit out of left field. If you look at the virus and how it has evolved, I expected something of the branches of Delta or maybe Beta. Omicron is just something totally unlike anything else. It’s a reminder that Mother Nature has lots of tricks up her sleeve.

Our ability to predict what the next variant is going to be — what it’s going to look like, where it’s going to come from, it’s not going to be easy. We should plan for those things and then figure out, “How do we keep our schools open? How do we keep businesses open? How do we get people to work safely? How do we make sure our hospitals don’t get filled up?”

We can do all of that, but we’ve spent so much energy focusing on prediction. We’ve spent far too little energy focusing on preparing for those things. The virus is going to be around for a long time. We can learn to live with it in a way that won’t kill thousands of Americans every day. We’ve got to be humble and respectful of what Mother Nature can do and prepare for it.
A Lucky Break Leads To A Book About Covid Vaccines

David Heath, NF ’06, kept digging until he found the scientists behind the mRNA research.

In the pandemic’s early days, I tried to persuade Moderna’s press handlers to give me a behind-the-scenes look at how the Covid-19 vaccine was being made. I assumed scientists there were dissecting this new strain of virus to find its Achilles’ heel. But even as Moderna refused to open its doors, I got a lucky break.

In doing research, I discovered that Moderna’s vaccine had actually been designed by a top scientist at the National Institutes of Health. His name was Barney Graham, and he was willing to talk. In my first interview, Graham explained how the vaccine had been a work in progress for at least a decade. It all started because of Graham’s career-long obsession with finding a vaccine for respiratory syncytial virus, better known as RSV. Although a vaccine for respiratory syncytial virus had been a work in progress for at least a decade, it was nonetheless a leading cause of hospitalizations for young children and can lead to lifelong complications. An effort to make a vaccine for it in the 1960s turned catastrophic. Sixteen of the 20 babies given an experimental vaccine had to be hospitalized with severe RSV complications. Two of them died. The vaccine had made the children more susceptible to the disease. That trial remains one of the biggest failures in vaccine history.

Graham’s story — along with those of Katalin Karikó, a researcher focused on mRNA vaccines, and Derrick Ross, the biotech entrepreneur who founded Moderna but was pushed out of the company — became the basis for my book “Longshot: The Inside Story of the Race for a COVID-19 Vaccine.”

By 2012, Graham and Jason McLellan, a scientist in his lab, made a breakthrough in vaccine science that should lead in coming years to a safe and effective RSV vaccine. They discovered how to deliver a protein from the virus to a cell in the most safe and effective way, allowing our immune systems to generate the best antibodies. Using their newfound discovery, the pair quickly turned their attention to coronaviruses in the wake of an outbreak of MERS in the Middle East.

Moderna wasn’t even working on vaccines yet. And it would be years before Graham collaborated with the company. But by the time SARS-CoV-2 caused a panic in Wuhan, China, Graham had a coronavirus vaccine he only had to tweak. He did did that on a Saturday morning at his home.

I spent countless hours interviewing these scientists — and many others — before the rest of the media figured out their significance. One of my editors at USA Today was so impressed by their stories that she contacted her literary agent, who signed me to a contract the next day.

The book is a story of scientists who persevered even as their colleagues failed to recognize the importance of their discoveries. It was only when the results of the vaccine trials were known that the scientific community woke up to their achievements. The book holds promise that scientists will be able to make a vaccine on the fly the next time we’re faced with a devastating pandemic.

The History of Tuberculosis Holds Lessons For Modern Day Public Health

Vidya Krishnan, NF ’21, on writing her debut non-fiction book “Phantom Plague.”

Dec. 20, 2016, was one of those winter mornings in New Delhi, India, when everything was enveloped in the thick smog of chronic air pollution. On that day, in one of Delhi High Court’s crowded court rooms, lawyers, activists, and the press had gathered for an extraordinary case. A father had filed a civil petition on behalf of his 18-year-old daughter, Shreya, who needed a new drug for tuberculosis.

The drug, Bedaquiline, was an antibiotic manufactured in India but owned by American pharmaceutical giant Johnson and Johnson. I spent the next few months reporting this case, which she won but died in the process.

As a health journalist in India, reporting on infectious diseases like TB, HIV, dengue, and Zika was routine for me. I came of age reporting on the boom in India’s domestic pharmaceutical industry, which we routinely call the “pharmacy of the world.” Shreya’s case was a hard blow from that. I could not reconcile that the Indian health ministry systematically denied access to medicines that were being manufactured in India.

The court case led me down a rabbit hole on tuberculosis, and I spent the next seven years tracing the evolution of the bacteria from ancient Egypt to 19th century New York before zooming the focus on in 21st century Mumbai. In writing “Phantom Plague: How Tuberculosis Shaped History,” I found that history was replete with examples of scientific progress being denied to the sick, old, poor, and vulnerable. While I was working on this book, the world was brought to its knees by the coronavirus pandemic, with the fruits of modern medicine, once again, being held from developing countries. Across the world, the poor are under-treated, without compassion, while the rich are over-treated. Both scenarios are contributing to an “antibiotic apocalypse” already dawning on Black and brown nations.

“Phantom Plague” started a conversation about the role of race, gender, and caste in perpetuating plagues. As we grapple with the pandemic, we can no longer just be held captive by a global approach to health that doesn’t care for the most vulnerable among us. Everyone deserves access to safe and humane health care.

An NPR Series Reconsiders the Question: “Where Are You From?”

Anjuli Sastry Krbechek, a 2021 visiting fellow, highlights how immigrant communities of color grapple with their own identities.

When I first came up with the idea for “Where We Come From,” I was trying to tell a version of a story I’ve heard my mom tell me so many times. She and my dad had an arranged marriage in the ‘60s. They went home to California after the wedding, while she waited in India for her green card. When she finally got it, she got on an international flight for the first time in her life and flew to a new country, leaving the entire world she knew behind.

I learned something new each time I hear this story, how terrified she was to be in a new place, how she felt a little excitement about meeting her new family. This story and other stories passed down about my family are something I carry with me constantly. They’re what I think about when someone asks me, “Where are you from?”

This isn’t just my family’s story. It’s a story other immigrants have passed on to their kids, and their kids in turn pass on to their own. These stories are an oral history of the people who make up the fabric of this country — stories that aren’t told enough. I started “Where We Come From” because I know these stories are universal.

Each episode tackles a story like this through intergenerational conversation. My hope is to build greater understanding between the people sharing their own story other immigrants have passed on to their kids, and the audience that is experiencing the conversation through NPR.

Our work culminated in four episodes, four podcast episodes, and three national radio segments. We shared all the videos on Instagram and did two Twitter Spaces. I wanted to flood different platforms to reach as many people as possible. People were elated just hearing and seeing their own stories reflected back at them.

Emily Kwong, who is third-generation Chinese, interviews her father for NPR’s “Where We Come From” series about what it means to lose a language to assimilate to a singular theme and focus on what’s most important to me: telling the stories about the communities at the heart of the series.

NPR has greenlit another set of podcast episodes of “Where We Come From.” During the first season, I tried to do a ton: act as executive producer, be a project manager, find my series sponsor, report, help with PR, and edit social media posts. This time, I hope to find a singular theme and focus on what’s most important to me: telling the stories about the communities at the heart of the series.
IN PUTIN’S WAR ON UKRAINE, JOURNALISTS ARE TARGETS, TOO

Brent Renaud, a Nieman Fellow killed in Ukraine while working on a documentary about refugees, practiced a journalism of humility, humanity, and empathy

BY ANN MARIE LIPINSKI
hen I asked Brent Renaud where he wanted his picture taken, he chose a stairwell lined with Nieman Fellows’ photographs at Harvard’s Lippmann House. He was giving a big talk that night during his own fellowship year, and I was marking the moment. Posing in the company of other journalists who told stories with their cameras, the gifted documentary filmmaker looked serene and at home.

Four years later, the photo is a somber artifact. Two weeks into the war on Ukraine, Brent was shot and killed in an ambush outside Irpin, where he was working on a documentary about refugees. Visual journalism, so dependent on proximity, carries heightened risk during conflict. In a haunting reminder, the framed picture above Brent’s left shoulder, of Santa talking to American troops, was made by Anja Niedringhaus, another Nieman Fellow killed on assignment, shot at close range in 2014 by a police officer in Afghanistan. “Where once reporters and photographers were seen as the impartial eyes and ears of crucial information,” the AP said in announcing her death, “today they are often targets.”

Fearless. Balley Badass. Certain descriptions of Brent in the days following his death offered caricatures of conflict journalists and obscured the man many of us knew. They didn’t capture his kindness and humility, or the humanity that was a hallmark of his work, whether documenting heroin addicts in New York or the Arkansas National Guard in Iraq. “Thoughtful stories about disenfranchised people” was how he described his mission.

There are tropes about conflict reporters that can camouflage the real reasons this young war has already killed seven journalists, injured 11, and claimed at least six as victims of kidnapping. From the indiscriminate attacks on civilians that also endanger reporters to the Russian government’s successful campaign to snuff out the last of the country’s independent press, it’s clear that Vladimir Putin presents the greatest danger to journalism in the region. “The Putin regime,” wrote photographer Juan Arajondo, a Nieman classmate of Brent’s who was wounded in the ambush in Ukraine and eventually evacuated to the U.S., “told me that he rejects the old “distorted, romanticized image” of photographers personified by the late Robert Capa and long encouraged by an industry that rewarded inexperienced freelancers building their careers in hot spots. “The idea that you would give your life for a photo — no, absolutely not. If anything, in my photography I want to celebrate life and the humanity that was a hallmark of his work, whether documenting heroin addicts in New York or the Arkansas National Guard in Iraq.”

“Brent must have known he needed visual evidence of that decision itself. All he needed was one minute of footage but probably knew it was critical for the film... It is that last percent effort that makes a photo story or documentary really strike hard. It’s also why visual journalists are more often the ones killed (not because they are macho or stupid). It’s because we always sit in the front seat of a car. We stay close enough to see and capture in a frame at the exact moment it happens.”

“Fearful of speaking to people he met, he devised a strategy he called “mayor-for-a-day,” which required him to stay in a city for 24 hours and try to see the world through the eyes of its mayor. “I freaked out the guy,” he recalled, “and he complained.”

I think Brent knew we thought he was special. “The best of us,” he told his grieving family. But what made him so was not daring do. It was his almost religious commitment to stand witness, to the fundamentals of reporting, to the power of telling someone’s story close up. There was an inevitability about Brent. He couldn’t not do what he did.

At the end of his Nieman year, I gave him a novel, “All the Light We Cannot See” by Anthony Doerr. In the book a French girl, blinded as a child, navigates the dangers of the German occupation through memory and her heightened powers of touch and perception, patiently making meaning out of chaos. “You are very brave,” a young German soldier tells her. “But it is not bravery, I have no choice,” she replies, “I wake up and live my life. Don’t you do the same?”

Samantha Appleton, an experienced conflict photographer who was also a member of Brent’s Nieman class, believes she understands why he wanted to make his way into Irpin for a documentary about refugees. “The very heart of this story is the moment a person decides (or is physically forced) to leave their home,” she wrote to me. “Brent must have known he needed visual evidence of that decision itself. All he needed was one minute of footage but probably knew it was critical for the film.”

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“THIS WAR IS UNPREDICTABLE AND DEADLY LIKE NO OTHER”

Russia’s brutally simple Ukraine strategy poses new risks for journalists

BY ROBERT MAHONEY
NIEMAN REPORTS SPRING 2022

Russian strike in the aftermath of a rising from an air

Mstyslav Chernov videographer Associated Press

PREVIOUS SPREAD: "Those terrible days in Grozny and the absolute disregard for everything."

Russia’s urban warfare strategy is brutally simple: surround, pound, probe, and clear. Forces try to lay siege to a city, pulverize whole neighborhoods with artillery and missiles, send in small groups to probe enemy defenses and eventually take the city street by street with tanks and infantry. “My experience of the Russians is they have no regard for civilian areas, for hospitals, for humanitarian columns, for refugees fleeing, none of that,” Gall says.

Hundreds of foreign journalists have poured into Ukraine since Russia invaded the country on Feb. 24. Many are concentrated in the capital of Kyiv and in the western city of Lviv, near the border with Poland. A lot of journalists haven’t experienced conflict in the former Soviet Union under Russian fire, notes Gall, “and I think some of them don’t quite realize how ruthless Russian forces can be.”

The first part of the Kremlin’s military playbook has already been on display in the besieged southeastern port of Mariupol. Many international journalists left the city, but some Ukrainian reporters stayed behind. “In Mariupol I realized that nowhere is safe,” says Ukrainian freelance photojournalist Evgeniy Maloletka, who has worked for numerous Western outlets, including the Associated Press. “Rockets can reach basements, destroy buildings, and kill people regardless of where they are hiding. Being encircled is the worst. I would highly recommend against ending up in and around the capital. News crews who have driven northwest towards the adjacent city of Irpin have come under fire. That was where U.S. filmmaker Brent Renaud was shot dead on March 13 while covering refugees fleeing Russian forces on the far side of Irpin. It is still not clear who fired on him and his colleague Juan Arredondo, who was wounded, but Ukrainian authorities blamed Russian troops.

The mayor of Irpin banned foreign journalists from entering the city after the attack. A day later in the near-

PREVIOUS SPREAD: Evgeniy Maloletka/AP Photo

People hide in an improvised bomb shelter in Mariupol. Russia’s urban warfare strategy is brutally simple, with forces pulverizing whole neighborhoods with artillery and missiles.

Additional reporting by Iulia Stashevska in Berlin.

stroke on a Kyiv TV tower on March 1.

If journalists cluster at the site of an attack mingling with Ukrainian civilians and military, or if they stay too long in one place, they become potential targets for Russian artillery and snipers. Photographers and videographers are particularly vulnerable since they need to get up close for images. Unlike in the U.S.-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, there are few opportunities for reporters to embed with the armed forces. No Western outlets are with the Russian military, of course. But even the Ukrainian regular forces have taken only a handful of foreign embeds. Consequently, international news outlets have relied partly on Ukrainian military-supplied footage and content generated by civilians on smartphones.

One foreign correspondent who did travel with Ukrainian forces is the BBC’s Quentin Sommerville who reported from besieged Kharkiv, Ukraine’s second-largest city. Sommerville covered the war in Syria from the rebel side. He said that conflict was worse for journalists but added: “At least for the moment, the threat is different. In Syria the risk wasn’t from artillery — it was that gnawing threat of kidnap. Afghanistan [was] IEDs [improved explosive devices]. Here it’s artillery and cruise missiles which worry me.”

Another veteran of the Middle East conflict, Nabih Rajabi of the Los Angeles Times, agrees: “This is early days. We haven’t even begun to see the sorts of artillery and mortar barrages that can be expected once the Russian army properly unleashes its military might.” That prospect haunts even war-hardened Ukrainian journalists.

“This time we didn’t travel to a war zone. Instead war came to us, straight into our homes,” says videographer Roman Stepanovych, who worked with U.S. outlets and co-founded the independent Ukrainian outlet Zaborona. “Having families and kids here makes us vulnerable.”

Some Ukrainian journalists have been covering conflict since Russia invaded the east of the country in 2014. Others have been thrust into the war. They say they need hostile environment training and protective equipment, such as anti-ballistic vests and helmets, which are in short supply globally.

“As journalists we face difficulties in everything, including weak communication channels with combat units, paranoia from local residents, and lack of access to state officials,” Stepanovych says.

“There’s also [a] certain incompetence on the side of fellow journalists. Not all of them know how to evaluate risks properly, have experience in hostile environments, and follow journalistic ethics. I’ve covered Crimea, Donbas, Turkey-Syria, and Myanmar. But this war is unpredictable and deadly like no other. It’s truly terrifying.”

Additional reporting by Iulia Stashevska in Berlin.

NIEMAN REPORTS SPRING 2022

NIEMAN REPORTS SPRING 2022
THE PUTIN REGIME DOESN’T WANT EYEWITNESSES

Prior to the invasion, few Ukrainian journalists had experience working in conflict zones. Now the war has come to their homes

BY KATHERINA SERGATSKOVA

EARLY ON FEB. 24, Russia began bombing Ukrainian cities. That same morning, an endless marathon for Ukrainian journalists began. This nightmare feels endless.

Since the start of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, seven journalists have died and at least 11 have been injured as of April 8, according to Reporters Without Borders, an organization that promotes press freedom around the globe. On Mar. 23, Oksana Baulina, a journalist from The Insider, a Russian investigative outlet, went to film a bombed-out shopping mall in central Kyiv shortly after the explosion. While she was there, the Russians hit the same spot again. She died along with a civilian who had accompanied her.

Eleven journalists have been threatened by the Russians, five have been shot at but not killed, and six have been kidnapped as of March 25, reports the Kyiv-based Institute of Mass Information, a non-governmental organization that works at the intersection of media and civil society. Some of them were released, and the location of some of them is still unknown. There have been four attacks on editorial offices in different regions of Ukraine. Russian FSB agents raided the homes of four journalists with Melitopol’s MV-Holding, detained them for several hours, and seized computers. Ten TV towers have been fired upon, and the Russian military has turned off the broadcasts of six TV channels. Seventy media organizations have stopped their work because of the invasion.

Many journalists and editors were psychologically unprepared for the fact that the war came to their home. Some of them decided to take up arms and went to fight; some became volunteers; some left the country. Prior to the invasion, most journalists in Ukraine had no experience with working in a war zone. Only a few dozen correspondents worked in the Donbas, a territory controlled by Russian-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine where fighting has been taking place for the past eight years. Few had security training or protective equipment — bulletproof vests and helmets with press patches. Only some had an understanding of cybersecurity risks, mostly those who worked in the occupied territory of Crimea, where Russian-style repressive laws were enacted. Hundreds of journalists suddenly found themselves in new conditions without the tools to protect themselves and report from conflict areas — a glaring problem.

As the war began, foreign journalists came to Ukraine, looking for local producers and fencers to help them report the story. Many people — film producers, art managers, political scientists — have stepped up to help them, but they have practically no journalism or conflict reporting experience either. And many don’t have an understanding of how to calculate risks.

The number of injured and killed reporters is constantly rising. Working as a journalist in the field is very dangerous, even with a helmet and bulletproof vest. My colleagues and I have been woken up in the middle of the night by air raid sirens and have rushed to a bomb shelter to take cover. I’ve spent hours at a time sitting in the shelter because a bomb could fly into your house at any moment. Reporting on the street doesn’t feel safe, not only because of the danger from the sky but also because somebody could misinterpret your actions, as people are very suspicious of others these days. And, if you’re in Russian-occupied territory, it means that you can’t work as a journalist at all. But it’s not just about the incredible destructive ness and unpredictability of the war in Ukraine: Russia is also targeting journalists for elimination as part of its so-called “special military operation.”

Perhaps the most eloquent picture that describes the essence of this war unleashed by Putin is the footage of a pregnant woman being rushed out of a bombed-out maternity hospital in Mariupol, which was mercilessly destroyed by Russian troops. Those images were taken by my colleagues and friends, AP journalists Evgeniy Malolotka and Mstyslav Chernov. Russian state TV channels called them “propagandists” and alleged that the pictures were staged. Because of that reporting, Russian troops were hunting Malolotka and Chernov, who were under constant threat. With the help of the Ukrainian military, they miraculously managed to get out of the city surrounded by Russian troops.

The Putin regime doesn’t want eyewitnesses. His propaganda machine constantly lies, reporting that the Ukrainians are shelling their cities and civilians themselves. The Russian regime is trying to destroy the very value of freedom, and who, if not the press, can bear witness to his atrocities? For every lie, journalists find thousands of facts to disprove them every day. The work of reporters, editors, producers, photographers, and videographers in Ukraine has a very high price. Some have already paid with their lives. We use all our strength to keep reporting so that the world can see Russia’s invasion for what it is — an attempt to take our freedom from us. They may try, but they won’t succeed.
THE FREE PRESS UNDER ATTACK IN UKRAINE — AND BEYOND

As Ukrainians defend their country against the Russian invasion, journalists there and in other post-Soviet states guard their fragile press freedoms

By Ann Cooper
Despite being outnumbered by better equipped Russian forces, the Ukrainian military — and a growing contingent of determined civilians — have fiercely resisted the invasion. The Kyiv Independent, Ukrainska Pravda, and a clutch of other forces, the Ukrainian military — and a growing contingent of journalists on high alert. Among the midway media countries, Ukraine might only be the beginning of Putin’s territorial ambitions have put other governments and journalists on high alert. Among the midway media countries, Moldova and Georgia announced plans to apply quickly for European Union membership, as Ukraine has.

Here is a look at how the independent press is surviving in Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, and Georgia.

Progressive journalism is the bedrock of Ukraine’s independent press. That’s why so many news organizations are raising millions of dollars to enable their work. Freedom of speech is still a big value for Ukrainians, said Sevgil Musaieva, editor-in-chief of Ukrainska Pravda, who also spoke to Nieman Reports before Russia’s invasion. The site was created in 2000 with a grant from the U.S. embassy in Ukraine, during then-president Leonid Kuchma’s rule, a period of “foreign agents” declarations and so little freedom that independent journalism never got a real foothold (most of the Central Asian republics).

Journalism in these four “midway media” countries lies somewhere between the freedom of the Baltics and the authoritarianism of most other post-Soviet states. Their press freedoms fluctuate, their funding is in constant deficit, and the survival of their independence still relies heavily on foreign funding, three decades after the Soviet collapse. The Russian invasion of Ukraine is a powerful reminder of the vital work these journalists and their newsrooms do — and how precarious press freedoms are in the face of aggression from Putin and other authoritarian leaders around the world.

Fears that Ukraine might only be the beginning of Putin’s territorial ambitions have put other governments and journalists on high alert. Among the midway media countries, Moldova and Georgia announced plans to apply quickly for European Union membership, as Ukraine has. Here is a look at how the independent press is surviving in Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, and Georgia.
Troop losses, civilian casualties, the rollout of sanctions has had wall-to-wall coverage of the fighting, detailing the site, was quickly expelled from the party.

Zelenskyy party for accepting a $20,000 bribe and another for attempting to bribe police. The parliamentarian, who offered a bribe, caught on video obtained by other means.

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Since the Russian invasion began, Ukrainska Pravda has had wall-to-wall coverage of the fighting, detailing troop losses, civilian casualties, the roll out of sanctions, and the international response. Like many other outlets, Ukrainska Pravda’s survival depended on foreign donors for years, but the site now is financed largely by advertising, and a new membership program also provides about 10 percent of the budget.

Even before the invasion and the GoFundMe campaign it has built on it, the independent online community in Ukraine had greater financial strength than its counterparts in other countries, thanks in part to population size and the high profile they have enjoyed at times of the size of the populations of Moldova, Armenia, and Georgia. Whether this support holds — and what the media landscape will look like during and after the fighting — are unknown.

Ukrainian news audiences also are more likely to sign up for subscriptions or media memberships, perhaps in part because of the highprofile role they play in exposing corruption after the Maidan street revolution that sent Viktor Yanukovych fleeing to Russia in 2014.

In May, Ukrainska Pravda announced its sale to Tomas Fiala, an investment banker who owns another popular Ukrainian news site, Novoye Vremya. Fiala signed a detailed agreement pledging he would not interfere editorially, and the purchase quickly enabled Ukrainska Pravda to hire several investigative reporters. And though the purchase by a rich businessman might sound like cause for alarm, particularly after the lockout at the Kyiv Post, Fiala “is not an oligarch,” said Musaieva. His business, Dragon Capital, “has no connection to state budget and to state companies,” that would make him vulnerable to political pressure.

In some ways, Ukrainian journalists are better prepared to cover the new Russian invasion than they had when Russia took Crimea in 2014. Back then, the journalists were caught by surprise, and conflict, but in the last eight years that has changed.

But the Russian assault may pose the most ominous threat yet to Ukraine’s independent newsrooms. Russian attempts to silence the country’s journalists or shut down the site haven’t succeeded, but a growing number of independent media outlets have been forced to shut down.

Meanwhile, journalists are writing and producing to document Russia’s invasion, but the expectations are low.

The racialization of this invasion — from Putin’s lies about the origins of the war to the way the war is framed in Russia’s media and abroad — has had a profound impact on the way journalists are covering the story.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has dominated media coverage for obvious and sensible reasons. It has ramifications for just about everyone around the globe, either directly or indirectly. The invasion means the chances of nuclear war just increased, if only slightly.

But we should not make the mistake that too many of us did at the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic, when coverage of anti Asian sentiment took a backseat until it had fully erupted into harassment and physical attacks.

The racialization of this invasion — from Putin’s lies about launching it in part to fight Nazis to straight name-calling journalists, government officials, and pundits showing more empathy on air because those suffering are European — is not a side issue to be dealt with later. It is an important factor that must be grappled with now.

That’s why every time a journalist dips into race-based reactions to the events unfolding in Ukraine, we need to call that out immediately, not six months from now.

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Her third reporting post was at a weekly paper that eventually became Moldova’s first privately-owned daily. “It was beautiful,” says Radu. “We did a lot of courageous, critical journalism.” But that ended just like her earlier jobs when the owner—a member of parliament—issued strict orders on covering upcoming elections. Finally, at ZdG, Radu and her colleagues were in control. “No one would tell us what to write, or how to write it.” When “we started, we were so happy,” she says. “We are free, yes, we had all the freedom.” There was just one problem: They didn’t have any money. “It was beautiful,” says Radu. “We did a lot of courageous, critical journalism.” But that ended just like her earlier jobs when the owner—a member of parliament—issued strict orders on covering upcoming elections. Finally, at ZdG, Radu and her colleagues were in control. “No one would tell us what to write, or how to write it.” When “we started, we were so happy,” she says. “We are free, yes, we had all the freedom.” There was just one problem: They didn’t have any money. 

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PUTIN SHUTS DOWN RUSSIA’S FREE PRESS

The crackdown on independent news outlets takes the country back to the Soviet era

BY ELIZAVETA KUZNETSOVA

The new law curbing what journalists can say about the military is essentially censorship of what journalists can say about the invasion of Ukraine. Any data on casualties or information on the resistance the Ukrainians are mounting could be considered “fake information.” Under the legislation, truthful reporting of the conflict is nearly impossible.

“It has been decided to eradicate journalism entirely and to put all disagreeable behind bars,” said Sergey Smirnov, the editor-in-chief of MediaZona, an independent investigative outlet. “Even if you don’t say anything [about the war], it might not save you if they [the Russian government] don’t like you.”

Controlling the narrative is particularly important for the Russian government amid the growing dissent in the country. The invasion of Ukraine coincided with the trial of Alexei Navalny, the opposition activist who rose to international prominence after being poisoned with a nerve agent. Convicted of stealing donations from his anti-corruption foundation, Navalny was sentenced to an additional nine years in prison. Navalny’s allies, who continue to produce livestreams on YouTube debunking state propaganda, believe the timing of the trial is not random. As Navalny said in a recent Instagram post, “We will circumvent blockages until the internet functions in Russia. And if it gets blocked, we will be using Morse code to deliver news to you.”

For years, independent media in Russia have reported on corruption, protests, and politics, reaching their audiences online through social media. The daily number of subscribers of news channels on Telegram, a cloud-based messaging app, has grown precipitously since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, according to TGStat.ru, a non-profit project that tracks the platform. But social media is not immune to state control. “It is often used to amplify confusion and misinformation. Social media is not immune to state control,” said Natalia Sindeeva. At the end of the broadcast, Dozhd announced a temporary suspension of its operations in Russia. “We need strength to endure and understand how to continue,” a representative said. “We really hope that we will return on air,” said General Manager Natalia Sinderova. At the end of the broadcast, Dozhd streamed Swan Lake, a reference to the August coup of 1991, when all Soviet TV channels played the ballet on repeat instead of showing images of the coup, becoming a symbol of suppression of truthful information.

Over the course of just one week, the independent media landscape in Russia was shattered, returning the country to the pre-Perestroyka state without any semblance of a free press. Russian media regulator Roskomnadzor blocked access to several independent media outlets, including MediaZona, Meduza, Nastoyashe Vremya, The New Times, Doxa, The Village, and Tyagga.Info. Russian prosecutors justify the move by accusing the outlets of purposeful and systematic dissemination of “false information about the essence of the special military operation.” But, they were accurately reporting news of Moscow’s invasion of Ukraine. Many international media corporations, including CNN, BBC, Bloomberg News, ABC, CBS News, and Radio Liberty, were forced to suspend operations in Russia.

The crackdown on independent news outlets in Russia — the award-winning Novaya Gazeta — announced the end of its reporting on the war in Ukraine in response to Russian government demands. A new law that bans the “dissemination of knowingly false information” about the Russian armed forces — and carries up to a 15-year penalty — was the final blow. The newspaper vowed to continue informing the public about the consequences of the economic sanctions, problems with import of medications, and other social issues.

This came a day after the independent TV channel Dozhd announced a temporary suspension of its operations in its broadcast on March 3. “We need strength to endure and understand how to continue,” a representative said. “We really hope that we will return on air,” said General Manager Natalia Sinderova. At the end of the broadcast, Dozhd streamed Swan Lake, a reference to the August coup of 1991, when all Soviet TV channels played the ballet on repeat instead of showing images of the coup, becoming a symbol of suppression of truthful information.

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Tech companies are under pressure from both sides of the conflict, which can result in questionable decisions that further aggravate the situation for independent outlets. Echo Moskvy, an independent radio station controlled by Russian state-owned company Gazprom-Media, reported being suspended by YouTube and Twitter even though the outlet maintained editorial independence and provided truthful reporting. Coincidentally, on March 3, the board of directors of Echo Moskvy decided to liquidate the outlet, according to its editor-in-chief Aleksey Venediktov, after Russian officials blocked its website over its reporting on Ukraine. Its dissolution is symbolic as the Russian government’s decision to spare the outlet from repression until now helped maintain at least a facade of freedom of press in the country.

Without independent media, the Russian public will become hostage to the state narrative about “the special operation” aimed at “de-Nazification” of Ukraine, as Moscow describes its war against the country. In fact, the use of the word “war” to refer to the conflict in Ukraine is prohibited in Russia. In the alternative reality of Russian propaganda, Zelensky’s government has lost control over the country after giving weapons to neo-Nazi groups that use combat drugs. “Without drugs people cannot shoot at their own citizens,” said Russian political expert Sergey Karmalubov, a common guest commentator, on state-run TV channel Rossiya 24 on March 5. “They [neo-Nazis in Ukraine] use Captagon, just like ISIS fighters,” he falsely added, while showing unverified footage from Syria.

To the domestic public, the crackdown on independent press is falsely presented as an exodus of traitors who have been misinforming the Russian public for decades. “Western media allege that there is no journalism in Russia, but in reality, they just need to abide by the Russian laws,” said one presenter on Rossiya 24 on March 5. He then reminded the audience that it was Germany and France that blocked the Russian international TV station RT, widely viewed as a government propaganda vehicle.

Apart from state control, independent outlets that rely on crowdfunding also struggle with the consequences of the economic sanctions, introduced by the U.S. and the E.U. in response to the invasion. “How can we survive,” said Smirnov in a Telegram post. “Due to the shutdown of Russian banks and the blocking of MediaZona, donations are starkly shrinking.”

Blocked independent outlets will continue to fight for their right to report through the courts. However, the situation will only intensify as the war in Ukraine goes on. With many journalists fleeing Russia, independent reporting is still possible from abroad. And local audiences can use VPN connections to access blocked sites and social media. But without international support, the free press in Russia will not survive, and the isolation of the Russian audience will continue.

“Right now, independent journalism can survive only outside of Russia,” said Smirnov. “Inside the country compromises are no longer possible.”

Russian policemen detain a participant in a rally against Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in downtown Moscow on March 6.
Immigration coverage overwhelmingly focuses on politics. It's time to center migrants' stories

BY ALLEGRA HOBS
HEN URIEL J. GARCÍA, AN IMMIGRATION REPORTER for The Texas Tribune, approaches migrants in hopes of quoting them in one of his stories about the strife along the Texas-Mexico border, he knows he will most likely be rejected. “They’ll almost always say no at first,” he says. In some cases, he’s been able to convince them to share their stories, which is fortunate — he considers these interviews integral to the reporting process, providing that vital human element to pieces that are fundamentally about human suffering and triumph. A recent story he wrote on calls to beef up border security in Texas takes care to extensively quote migrants seeking asylum and their family members.

Without these stories, García says, reporters can easily fall into a habit of simply quoting experts on immigration policy. Human stories risk being reduced to cold political matters; people with often traumatic life experiences are reduced to data and election talking points. But García can’t blame these prospective sources for shying away from the press. As a Mexican immigrant himself, having grown up in a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood in Phoenix, Arizona, he’s sympathetic to the distrust of his profession. For one thing, he says, “We have a lot to lose if we say something wrong.” Additionally, the press hasn’t accumulated goodwill within the immigrant communities already in the United States.

“When a journalist approaches [an immigrant] and says, ‘I want to hear what you have to say,’ it’s because Trump did something, [or] Biden did something,” says García. “No one is necessarily asking them, ‘I want to hear what you have to say, because I see you as a member of the community’ ... A lot of them are being questioned for the first time publicly about an immigration policy, but for them, why aren’t they being asked about the local elections? Why aren’t they [being asked] about changes in their neighborhood? ... They’re just not used to being approached by someone who’s interested in their stories.”

García’s experience, both as an immigrant and an immigration reporter, encapsulates some of the challenges facing this fraught beat at a time when the topic is hounded by inflammatory rhetoric and misinformation. When it comes to immigration, the American public is woefully misinformed. A Pew Research Center study published in 2019 revealed that more than a third of Americans wrongly believed “that most immigrants are criminals,” a notion that García and other reporters trying to refute the beat, is coverage of immigration and immigrant communities that reminds audiences what’s at stake — human lives.

Lein Krauze, a Mexican journalist for Univision and a contributing columnist for The Washington Post’s Global Opinions section, wrote a column in March that had some strong words for the English-language press. “The border crisis is about human pain and desperation. Why can’t the media grasp this?” asks the headline. In the piece, Krauze calls the media’s coverage of the border “solipsistic,” consumed by quibbling over the use of the word “crisis” (which should be used, he believes), and argues that reporters are too focused on the political ramifications. “The reality faced by hundreds of thousands of children, teenagers and parents south of the border should be of enormous consequence in the national immigration debate,” writes Krauze. “But it isn’t, and that’s a shame.”

The reality, Krauze says, is that a combination of crime, corruption and even climate change has created an untenable situation in parts of Central America — a situation worsened by American disengagement. Migrants are fleeing gang violence, police brutality, domestic and sexual abuse, and the devastation of repeated hurricanes. But this is not what dominates the immigration coverage in America.

“I think that my colleagues, with a few exceptions, look at immigration basically as a political issue,” Krauze says. “What does this or that policy do to the political balance in Washington? Does this hurt the president?”

Alisa Zaira Rennick, who covers southern Arizona for the radio station KIZZ’s Fronteras Desk and previously covered the border and immigration for Arizona Public Media, agrees it can be easy to go down a “policy rabbit hole” instead of focusing on the communities that will be impacted by the policy in question. This points to the importance of local news in covering immigration; national outlets with reporters parachuting in are more likely to overlook important local angles.

“Part of the benefit and part of the challenge of reporting on immigration locally is you’re not just reporting on a policy change, because NPR is already going to do that,” she says. “Step two is, what does this mean for the communities that I’m covering? What does it mean in Arizona? What does it mean in Tucson?”

In July, Rennick wrote a two-part report on the effect of Title 42, a pandemic-era policy facilitating the mass expulsion of asylum-seekers, and uncertainty around an expiration allowing migrants in particularly desperate situations to circumvent the policy. The report takes readers inside a shelter in Nogales, Arizona, where migrants are offered temporary accommodation and food after being processed. In addition to explaining the policy itself, Rennick underscores the experience of the shelter workers and asylum-seekers. A migrant going by the name of Yescas threatened,” according to ProPublica.

Rachel Glickhouse, partner manager for both “Electionland” and “Documenting Hate” projects. ProPublica was able to field tips and comments from Spanish speakers through Univision, allowing it to better cover immigrant communities.

Some mainstream newsrooms partner with outlets serving immigrant communities. Univision, for example, has partnered with ProPublica for both the latter’s “Electionland” and “Documenting Hate” projects. ProPublica was able to field tips and comments from Spanish speakers through Univision, allowing it to better cover immigrant communities. Rachel Glickhouse, partner manager for both “Electionland” and “Documenting Hate,” wrote that these tips helped produce hundreds of stories. The project received more than 35 reports of anti-immigrant incidents and attacks occurring in Walmart stores across the country, resulting in a Univision piece about how employees felt they received inadequate support when confronted with vitriol on the job. Univision also reported on a Spanish-language version of neo-Nazi website The Daily Stormer, which aimed to spread racist and anti-Semitic messages to Spanish speakers and recruit Spanish-speaking volunteers. The site “removed the name of a popular Spanish forum ... after legal action was threatened,” according to ProPublica.

The America-centric approach to immigration coverage is compounded by what researchers say is a geographically limited view of the immigration beat, which focuses mostly on the border itself. Krauze points to televised news coverage of Vice President Kamala Harris’s trip to Guatemala and Mexico in June as an example. The trip was an opportunity to delve into the conditions in Guatemala and Mexico, the effects American
"I think that my colleagues, with few exceptions, look at immigration basically as a political issue"  

Leon Krauze  
Univision

guns are having on violence in Mexico, and the effects of American foreign policy on the region. “What did [the media] care about?” asks Krauze. “When are you going to the border?” So that kind of myopic approach, I think, is sadly all too common in American English-language media when it comes to immigration.

Thus, in 2018, a non-profit supporting independent media in dozens of countries, teamed up with immigration newsletter Migratory Notes to analyze the media’s coverage of immigration stories that had been catalogued in the newsletter from 2017 to 2020, it found that immigration coverage is dominated by stories centering illegality and criminality, in which migrants are being dehumanized or otherwise have no agency. In addition, coverage tends to revolve around the southern border region, excluding large immigrant communities like Florida and New Jersey. Florida, for example, while containing 10.2 percent of the U.S. immigrant population, was only the focus of 3.9 percent of 721 location-based immigration stories examined by the research. And national news outlets based in New York, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C., dominate immigration coverage, per the study. “There is an opportunity to invest in these communities, which are generally outside traditional landing places and national media centers, and train local reporters in the fundamentals of immigration coverage and provide story grants or other incentives to foster coverage,” the study argues.

García also recommends a more holistic approach to immigration coverage, one that gives more attention to immigrant communities already in the U.S. “We have to also write about immigration from inside the country,” he says. “Immigration and patterns of migration affect almost every sector of life — think income, schooling, hospitals, public safety, and more.” In October, in a column for the 

It’s also important to be cautious when quoting sources who spout misinformation, notes Garcia. “It’s important to contrast a politician’s claims on immigration with the facts,” she says. For example, if you quote someone saying that the border is wide open, I think it’s important to note that [the] majority of the undocumented people living in the U.S. had come here legally, overstaying their visas.”

Drawing attention to real immigrant stories can help blunt the spread of fear-mongering narratives. “Ultimately, the best way to debunk a lot of the false narratives is to highlight immigrants’ stories by giving them a platform to speak for themselves,” Garcia argues. Plus, it’s not just right-wing news sources that will


"All news coverage of immigration, by virtue of being a new, cruel policies — not to let the Trump administration off the hook, but to show how deeply entrenched all of this stuff is, how it’s inextricably tied to the ideology of one person’s idealism but decades of congressional funding and bipartisan agreement."  

Last September, the newsletter took on the heavily covered story of the Haitian migrant encampment in Del Rio, Texas, which drew attention for its size, squalor, and the harsh response from Border Patrol. BORDER/LINES noted that for decades Haitian migrants have been largely barred from claiming asylum status, instead categorized as “economic migrants,” because the U.S. was avoiding acknowledging its role in a humanitarian crisis. (The government was materially supporting dictator François Duvalier, who was in power until 1971.)

“All news coverage of immigration has a bias towards the new,” says Del Valle. She hopes that by providing deeper context on what came before, she and other reporters can foster a better understanding of what is happening now.
The Midterms Are Coming. Here's How to Cover Polling

In an age of hyperpartisanship, adding context to survey data is key to giving audiences the full picture.

By Celeste Katz Marston
Illustrations by Doug Chayka
In the summer of 2017, Susan Potter of The Atlanta Journal-Constitution wrote the kind of column that no editor wants to pen.

“Our poll of the 6th Congressional District race, conducted two weeks before the June 20 runoff, missed the mark. There’s just no getting around it,” Potter wrote. “It showed Democrat Jon Ossoff with a 7-point lead among likely voters, with a margin of error of 4 percentage points. Republican Karen Handel ended up winning by 4 points.”

Potter, the Journal-Constitution’s senior editor for state government and politics, wrote that the sample of nearly 800 likely voters didn’t have enough young, female, or minority respondents. The pollster, Abt Associates, overweighted the responses from those groups to make up for it. “Typically, such adjustments don’t have a big impact on the final results,” Potter explained. “But in this case, the demographic groups adjusted for tended to vote disproportionately for the Democrat.”

But rather than shrink back after the missed call in the Ossoff-Handel faceoff — which at the time was the most expensive House race in U.S. history — the paper continues to commission polls as a tool to inform its coverage. “I have to keep an eye on what we’re learning about polling, [and] we will have to keep evaluating our methodology and, eventually, whether we keep on doing it,” Potter explains. “But right now, it remains the best tool we have for getting some picture of public sentiment.”
The Atlanta paper’s bad experience involved a single race in a single congressional district, but since the 2016 presidential election, news organizations across the country have been forced to reckon with both the inaccuracies of political polling as well as the misguided editorial choices that created an aura of invincibility around Hillary Clinton’s campaign. There were a variety of problems with polls that media outlets used (and commissioned) while covering the election: Some surveys did not weight the responses properly to ensure the polls properly reflected the electorate. Some were affected by “nonresponse bias,” which occurs when the population that doesn’t respond to a poll is substantially different than the one that does. At the same time, news organizations often failed to give context to survey data, playing up single polls in an attempt to inject excitement into their horserace coverage. This dynamic has led many Americans to doubt the polling reported in the media, and research suggests that people are more inclined to believe polls that tell them what they want to hear.

The Capitol insurrection on Jan. 6, 2021, was “one of the ultimate evidence points of what happens when people’s mistrust in polling and election results and the reporting around that gets weaponized,” says Margaret Talev, managing editor for politics at Axios. When polling data is off — as in 2020 when polling indicated that Joe Biden had a larger lead than what he wound up winning by — and coverage amplifies it, that dynamic can lead to distrust, especially in such a hyperpartisan environment. “It’s an additional layer of responsibility to how we cover data and elections,” Talev explains.

When handled with care, surveys can enhance coverage of not only elections, but many other issues, from the Covid-19 response to international relations to abortion. They can give insights into how attitudes on certain issues change over time or explain how our government fails to deliver key reforms despite overwhelming public support. (For example, 84 percent of Americans support background checks for gun purchases, but Congress has made little progress in advancing legislation.) “Voters in federal elections only get to weigh in every two years as to who represents them in Washington and what issues they want them to focus on,” says Steven Shepard, senior campaigns and elections editor and chief polling analyst for Politico. “Polling is a way to get the voice of the people in front of their leaders more frequently than that.”

As news outlets prepare for the 2022 midterms and beyond, many are grappling with how to best cover polls as part of an accurate and balanced news diet. The question remains: How can we get the most useful information out of polling — and convey that information well — while avoiding pitfalls of small sample sizes, leading questions, and the narrowness of horserace coverage?...
national polls correctly estimated Joe Biden would get more votes than Trump, Biden's ultimate margin of victory wasn’t as big as the numbers had indicated. “The polls overstated the Biden-Trump margin by 3.9 points in the national popular vote and by 4.3 points in state-level presidential polls,” AAPOR’s analysis of post-election surveys found. Looking ahead, pollsters will need to recognize the importance of reaching people in different ways, says Politico’s Shepard. This means including more cell phone interviews and branch out to email, text message, or regular mail. Other analyses have pointed to the need for a broader educational attainment as a bigger part of the equation along with other attributes such as age, gender, and geographic location. Pew, a formidable name in polling, has already announced substantial changes to its survey system, including altering the weighting of its polls to better reflect America’s partisan balance, retiring thousands of “demographically overrepresented” panelists and recruiting new ones, updating its recruitment materials, and adding respondents who prefer to answer poll questions by mail. These adjustments could help address some of the fault lines of polling for better accuracy, but the press will still have lots to be cautious about — and will need to alter coverage practices — no matter how polls are conducted.

The long-term approach can be particularly revealing on social-issue and policy polls. ”Tales points to Axios’ ongoing survey research on Covid-19, done in conjunction with Ipsos, that’s been cited by research published in the Journal of Natural for its accuracy. Through sustained polling, Axios/Ipsos has been able to gather anecdotes and data-driven insights about America’s views on the coronavirus crisis and vaccinations. The polling has investigated how news consumption habits relate to infection rates and willingness to get vaccinated, and studied attitudes about in-person versus remote schooling. “We see value in the trends that polls reveal and in the crosstabs for a lot of responses to big questions of our day,” says A. "A poll is only as good as the moment in which you ask it, the modeling of the universe, and the respondents that choose to give you their data. Some of these choices, the study found, aligned with the outlet’s ideological slant or favored polls that showed “significant changes” in the standing of the competitors. "If media is the conduit by which the public gauges the state of the race, then we are being misled,” Searles and her collaborators wrote. Addressing the much-criticized poll-driven horse race mentality is key to fixing this. As Harvard’s Kennedy School has noted, horse race coverage has been linked to distrust in public officials and news outlets, to hurting women candidates who focus more on policy issues, and to sidelining third-party candidates via coverage of politics through a two-party lens. But it’s not about stopping the coverage. It’s about adding context. Reporting revealing new poll results, says Joshua Duclay, professor of political science and director of the Center for Public Opinion at the University of Massachusetts Lowell, may be of public service. “It can raise the stakes, which increases the probability that those voters at the margins turn out, and I think that that can be a positive for democracy.” Speaking directly to voters at home and on the trail provides color and context, but there’s no getting around the fact that polls cover a broader swath of public sentiment than reporters can ever reach through anecdotes, no matter how many they gather and how fastidiously. Sometimes, as hard as it may be, journalists need to take a step back from covering individual polls, says Amy Walter, publisher and editor-in-chief of the Cook Political Report with Amy Walter. Take, for example, the stories about President Donald Trump’s approval rating in a mid-January Quinnipiac poll, which got wide-spread coverage. “Instead of breathlessly covering this news,” she advises, “media outlets can say, ‘Well, let’s wait and see, as other polls come in, where this fits into the trend line.’ Is that really where he is, or is that one poll? Put it into context.” Putting too much focus on outlier polls can give the public a skewed version of the overall trajectory of an issue or race and create an artificial sense of a tum shift that candidates or advocacy groups can use to raise funds and recruit — or as Pacific Standard once put it, allowing polls to create changes “instead of detecting them.”

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People protest against the Covid-19 school mask mandate outside a Hillsborough County School Board meeting in Tampa, Florida, May 2021. Polls like those conducted by Axios/Ipsos help paint the larger picture of public opinion around Covid by pairing data with anecdotes.

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a November 2021 story about internal GOP polling
 wariness. Campaigns release those because they want the
public — or their opponents — to see them, and not nec-
essarily because they accurately reflect the state of the race.
Media outlets make some exceptions depending on context and format. Politico, for example, ran a 2021 story about internal GOP polling showing Republicans with a potential advantage in the 2022 midterms. The piece clearly identified the poll as partisan and noted that it fell largely in line with public polling. In other cases, outlets like The Atlanta Journal-Constitution — which now conducts polls with the University of Georgia — will cite an internal poll in a political newsletter or blog format instead of a standard, general-consumption news story. Those mentions come with cautionary language and are meant to help tell a larger story about a campaign’s operations.

But it’s not just political polling reporters who have to look out for. “Polls that are conducted by companies that reinforce their brand identities are things you should just toss in the garbage,” says Philip Bump, a national correspondent for The Washington Post. “It’s just an ad, and we should absolutely not be in the business of just running people’s ads for them.” Companies make supposedly data-based claims all the time, but obviously, “it’s to their advantage to frame the data in the most profitable way. In 2007, for example, the U.K.’s Advertising Standards Authority ordered Channel 4 to stop claiming four out of five dentists recommended its toothpaste, because the survey actually allowed the participants to recommend multiple brands.

Other things to avoid include self-selecting polls, where the response group is not a representative sample of a larger population, but entirely composed of people who felt like taking a poll — sometimes repeatedly.

Still, Bump says pollsters can still be useful: “There are ways in which you would vet a source for a

and detailed explanations of its process and methods.

Still, Skelley says that aggregators rely on individual polls, all of which have some level of error built into them. “There’s always going to be some confidence interval — which is how R.R.S. Sir David Attenborough was almost christened Boaty McBoatface by internet voters.

“The aggregators aggregate under the assumption that essentially is two points, too, that it goes both ways. The reality is that if errors are only going in one direction, then the aggregation isn’t really making anything more accurate,” he says. Still, he says, the average the aggregator spits out “is a number that

— and vice versa,” says David Saltzman, a senior director of public polls at FiveThirtyEight.

But reporters also shouldn’t be overly cautious to the point of being factually inaccurate, warns Dyck, from UMass Lowell.

Take a context between two candidates. There’s a two-point
spread and the poll’s margin of error is plus or minus three percent. Because the spread is within the margin, “That is not a statistically significant finding,” says Dyck. In this situation, reporters often roll out “my least favorite press word in all of coverage, which is that the poll reveals a ‘statistical tie.’ Okay, there is no such thing as a ‘statistical tie’. … Probabilistically, in the poll, Candidate X actually is ahead of Candidate Y — just not at a scien-
tific level of certainty.”

So, what does the reporter or headline writer do? Simple language is usually the most accurate: “A close poll reveals a close race,” Dyck says. Transparency also mat-
ters. Experts consistently recommend that at the very least disclosing who conducted the poll, the dates the polling
 took place, the margin of error, the number of respon-
dents, and methodology.

Within this space, there’s also a need to avoid overflow-

Wrestling with the lessons of 2016 and 2020 is one thing. But reporters also shouldn’t be overly cautious to the point of being factually inaccurate, warns Dyck, from UMass Lowell.

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T WAS A FINE MARCH MORNING 16

years ago and the phones in my office at ABC News were ringing hard. The Associated Press had moved a story on a poll by the American Medical Association with an undeniably sexy topic: specifically, spring break sex.

Nightline was interested. Radio was raring to go. Just one thing was missing: a green light from the Polling Unit.

You can find both beauty and the uglies in this little episode, one of hundreds like it in my tenure as ABC’s director of polling. This nugget may stand out in memory simply because an organization as respected as the AMA ginned up a survey that, on inspection, was pure nonsense. It gives the lie to the notion that a seemingly reputable source is all we need.

The sad part is that, all these years later, the issue’s the same: Problematic surveys clog our inboxes and fill our column inches every bit as much now as then. And the need for vigilance — for polling standards — is as urgent as ever.

The redemption: We were empowered to shoot it down. With the support of management, we’d developed carefully thought-out poll reporting policies that included such requirements as full disclosure, probability sampling, neutral questions, and honest analysis. And we had the authority to implement them.
serious data. And this was far from reliable data — the imprimatur of the American Medical Association and The Associated Press notwithstanding. I’ll admit to a little grim satisfaction when, almost three months after we took a bye on this piece of work, the AP issued a “corrective,” in its parlance, withdrawing its story.

Much more satisfaction came from the good side of this go-round: the simple fact that we could keep bad data off the air.

On a hype job around spring break sex, maybe this is not such a big deal. But the bigger picture cuts to the fundamental pact between news organizations and their audiences: the promise that we check out what we’re reporting, because that’s our job. We don’t just pass unverified assertions from point A to B; so-called media can handle that quite well. Thank you. We add value along the way, through the simple act of employing our repertorial skills to establish, to the best of our ability, that the information we’re reporting is true, meaningful, and worthy of our audience’s attention. Break this deal and we may as well go sell fish.

Most news we cover does get the scrutiny it deserves. Polls, sadly, get a bye. They’re often compelling — perhaps too much so. They’re authoritative, or seem that way, because they are presented with supposed mathematical certainty. They add structure to news reports that often otherwise would be based on mere anecdote and assumption.

And checking them out seems complicated, especially in understaffed newsrooms full of undertrained English majors. The plain reality is that the news media for far too long have indulged themselves in the lazy luxury of being both data hungry and math-phobic. We work up a story, grab the nearest data point that seems right, and without the due diligence we bring to every other element of the reporting profession.

We should be serious. Bad data aren’t just funny numbers. Manufactured surveys traffic in misinformation, even downright disinformation. Often, they’re cranked up to support someone’s product, agenda, or point of view. Other times they’re the product of plain old poor practice. They come at us from all corners — corporate America and its PR agents, political players, our readers, and their audiences: the promise that we check out the fundamental pact between news organizations and their audiences: the promise that we check out the data off the air.

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REBUILDING THE JOURNALISM PIPELINE

Newsrooms need new entry points for young journalists from diverse backgrounds

BY CLIO CHANG PORTRAITS BY TREVOR PAULHS
José Romero always thought he was something of an introvert until he discovered a love for journalism and interviewing people at Tarrant County College, a two-year community college in Fort Worth, Texas. Romero joined the school paper, The Collegian, where after a few semesters, he was elected editor-in-chief. Next year he’ll transfer to the University of Texas at Arlington, and he wants to pursue journalism as a career. His dream job: to become a video game journalist at a publication like Bloomberg.

But as a 21-year-old Hispanic journalist who grew up working-class in Texas without a degree from a well-known university, Romero is unsure about what the path might look like for him to get there.

“My status is going to be something people look at and say that I’m not distinguished enough and that I didn’t get the proper education needed to be a journalist,” Romero says, noting that he hopes the training and mentorship he’s getting at school will help overcome some of the barriers. “It’s an unfortunate reality, and I hope that I’m exaggerating, but it’s stuff I have to put into consideration. I’m going to have to put in that extra effort and need to find a way to get myself known because I don’t know anyone in the industry.”

The lack of adequate pipelines into journalism for candidates from different backgrounds has contributed to the fact that newsrooms too often don’t look like the communities they cover — a refrain often repeated but rarely addressed. According to the American Society of News Editors’ diversity survey published in 2019, people of color were only 21.9 percent of the workforce of the 428 U.S. newsrooms that responded. A survey published in 2016 from researchers at the University of Missouri and University of Illinois showed that nearly 54 percent of the interns came from highly selective universities that make up only 13 percent of four-year colleges.

Aside from the full rides that some elite private schools can offer low-income students, going through most of these paths means taking on hefty student loans and starting in debt in a precarious industry. Yet those schools are often necessary for many non-white, non-rich people starting out in journalism. As journalist Rachelle Hampton wrote in Slate, “As a Black woman I didn’t have a choice not to go to J-school. … Journalism is an industry rife with nepotism, where career trajectories are determined more often by the people that you know rather than the quality of your work.”

“Without deep networks or safety nets, getting a coveted entry-level internship or trying to start out by freelancing can be extremely difficult, many people are locked out by default. Yet journalism desperately needs more reporters who have backgrounds like Romero’s and Hampton’s. Much of the pipeline problem has to do with retention issues — how journalists from different backgrounds are treated when they enter institutions that were not made for them. But it’s also about how, and whether, journalists can even enter the industry in the first place.”

Some people within newsrooms, non-profit organizations, and educational institutions are attempting to build up and reimagine these pipelines, even as the industry continues to face financial challenges, whether through sustained mentorship programs, investing in wider outreach for paid internships and training, or expanding flexibility around what journalism work looks like. Labor unions are also working to lift workplace conditions overall by raising salaries and improving benefits, which are some of the most straightforward ways to allow people from different kinds of backgrounds to support themselves. There are a number of solutions, well-trod and inventive alike, should institutions care to invest in them.

For a time, the traditional pipeline into journalism was to get experience as an intern or entry-level assistant at a smaller local paper, maybe moving into a general assignment reporting job at a medium-size regional newspaper, then perhaps honing a beat and eventually getting hired at a larger, national newsroom. But over the past few decades local newsrooms have been under duress; a PEN America report from 2019 found that since 2014, over 1,800 newspapers — an estimated 20 percent of the national total — had closed.

The decimation has continued in recent years. Payzer recently memorialized 90 local newsrooms, some more than 100 years old, that have closed since the pandemic began. Broadcast television has been relatively more stable job-wise, but faces similar threats with corporate consolidation. With the shuttering of these regional newsrooms comes the decline of that natural progression that used to usher many journalists through the early days of their careers.
While new entry points into journalism have appeared, a new reporter can always, say, start a Substack or podcast — those options don’t necessarily ensure a secure career. “The future when I was a young journalist was much clearer than the future now,” but there are fewer paths available today, says Kim Klem, senior vice president of Report for America, a national service program responding to the decimation of local journalism. For journalists who might be graduating with hefty student loans, Klem says, it’s hard to imagine or plan for a sustainable future in the industry.

Report for America places emerging journalists — nearly half of whom are journalists of color — into newsrooms around the country. The program pays half of the journalist’s salary for the first year and provides training and mentorship for corps members.

Eve Zuckoff, a 25-year-old climate change and environmental reporter for public radio station CAI in Woods Hole, Massachusetts, went through this pipeline. She was hired by the station after completing a Report for America program there. Before she was a corps member, Zuckoff was doing freelance production for a radio station in Boston, but her situation was less than stable. “The pipeline from freelance producer to paid employee is really hard to navigate and can be really disheartening,” Zuckoff says. She wanted to do more reporting and really hard to navigate and can be really disheartening. “It’s really hard to navigate and can be really disheartening.”

Eve Zuckoff, CAI Woods Hole

What’s clear is that many programs that might be overlooked by hiring managers are already training the exact people the industry needs. “There are so many different kinds of perspectives lacking in newsrooms because we have had such a rigid idea overall of what qualifies somebody to become a good journalist,” says Rhema Bland, director of the Ida B. Wells Society for Investigative Reporting, a national organization that trains reporters to work in newsrooms.

One program the Ida B. Wells Society runs partners with major news organizations to place students with experience in multiple sections of student newspapers with opportunities to work with markets internships. “It’s all misbilled to us that local journalism is a step- down,” Zuckoff says. “That’s what they do to get in — are often a prerequisite to get a full-time job in the industry. And often to get even a ‘bigger’ internship, you need the reporter experience — she said she worked three internships during college, most of which she credited getting mainly because of the connections she had by attending Northwestern. She then secured her first fellowship at The New Republic in New York City, where she made $30,000 per year, a difficult salary to live on. (Full disclosure: I am also a paid and eventually became a journalist. There she found it difficult to keep expanding the pipeline and mentor younger writers since the publication relied more on experienced freelancers with ready-to-go copy, so Bland turned to teaching when the opportunity arose.

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NIEMAN REPORTS SPRING 2022

WANT TO MAKE REAL PROGRESS IN NEWSROOM DEI?

AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT IS ESSENTIAL

Most newsrooms think of diversity and inclusion work as an internal affair, but those efforts won’t succeed in a bubble

BY JENNIFER KHO AND JENNIFER BRANDEL

It’s a story we’ve heard over and over again: A newsroom makes a commitment to diversity and steps to bring in candidates from different backgrounds when it has open positions. But even when it successfully hires people from underrepresented communities, those employees may not thrive or may decide to leave if the news organization hasn’t done enough to create a truly inclusive culture.

What does a truly inclusive culture look like? Most newsrooms think of diversity and inclusion work primarily as an internal affair — being respectful to everyone in the organization and treating everyone within that sphere equally. But inclusion work can’t succeed in a bubble.

We’ve heard frequently from journalists in underrepresented groups that a lack of consideration for diverse audiences — and a feeling that the stories that matter to diverse communities aren’t prioritized or supported — has led them to leave a publication.

“Traditional” journalism path, but with the mentorship and community provided by the program, he was able to feel more grounded and comfortable. For many, the entry point is cut off before they even attempt to enter a newsroom. As Joshua Benton wrote in a piece for Nieman Lab, educational institutions have a big role to play in developing these pipelines.

On the training end, Benton suggests an “alternative certification” program with some institutional prestige — similar to what K-12 teachers can get — that is affordable and accessible. Benton argues for a course that would cost a few thousand dollars and could be done remotely, with flexible hours, so that a much wider swath of people could attend. It would not only offer journalism training but also networking opportunities and would be attached to some institution with a big name in the industry. As Benton puts it, “Maybe it’s time for the profession to build a new path into the industry — not just try to tweak the old ones.”

It also falls on employers to be more expansive and flexible in what they look for when hiring journalists into entry level positions. Not only do newsrooms need to look beyond certain colleges, they also have to think more broadly of ways to make their companies more accessible.

Take the move to remote work during the pandemic; allowing people to work from anywhere removes one big barrier to entry for those who might want to apply to jobs in expensive cities (although this would mainly apply to national publications). “This has to be up to organisations to be flexible in what work looks like and what showing up on the job location-wise looks like,” says Tina Sturdevant, director of talent, diversity, and inclusion at The Athletic; otherwise companies have to subsidise those moving costs. When NPR made its fall internships remote during the pandemic, the organisation received 20,520 applicants for 27 openings, versus 2,977 applicants for 35 openings the year before. (I spoke with Sturdevant before The New York Times announced in January an agreement to purchase The Athletic.)

Sturdevant, who went to San Diego State University, understands the challenges of creating these pipelines. “You actively have to work at this and actively have to keep hiring managers accountable,” Sturdevant says. “A really interesting thought that I’m hearing harder to implement in practice is having the conversations of organisations putting their [diversity, equity, and inclusion] metrics and goals against their company [key performance indicators]. Are they saying, ‘If you’re not hiring diversely and not having a safe work environment, then your bonus is impacted because you did not hit the goal?’”

Not all of it has to come at a large cost; The New York Times recently launched a corps program that will pair mostly freshman and sophomore college students with Times journalists, who will meet with those students a few times a year as career mentors until they graduate. “Understanding how journalism operates and under-
We believe that serving diverse audiences externally is as essential as creating an inclusive culture internally. The two are inextricably linked. The key here lies in audience engagement.

Loosely defined, the culture of any newsroom is “how do we do things around here.” And one of the biggest cultural markers of any newsroom is forged in editorial meetings where staff decisions of what’s considered “newsworthy” and a “good story” are made. If a newsroom’s audience is less diverse, those decisions are more likely shaped by the media habits of an audience that is already familiar with the newsroom. But those habits do not mirror all of the cultural markers of any newsroom is forged in editorial meetings where staff decisions are made. If a newsroom’s audience is less diverse, those decisions are more likely shaped by the media habits of an audience that is already familiar with the newsroom. But those habits do not mirror all of the cultural markers of any newsroom.

In order to be meaningful, the outside engagement must be heard and acted upon. It’s critically important that you connect to your audience, hear their concerns, and do something about them. The Listening and Engagement team at the Seattle Times, for example, is an active participant in editorial decision-making, and it’s written into the job description of the editorial director. The Listening and Engagement team is responsible for ensuring that the newsroom considers audience feedback and that the newsroom is accountable for action on that feedback. The team also monitors and communicates the progress of the newsroom’s efforts to engage its audience.

In other words, how can you not be an extractive “askhole” in the engagement you do? How do you ensure that you’re not just counting how many people completed a survey or took some action that you can count as “engagement,” but that their insights actually shaped decisions that were made? Whenever you’re creating an opportunity for engagement and listening, it’s imperative that you ask people what to expect. What will you do with their insights or participation, and how will it matter? This could be as simple as explaining your process clearly, like Crosscut does for its public-powered journalism. If you’re constrained for space and doing a call to action on social media, create a page to link to that gives sufficient context as to why you’re asking and what will happen next. Just make sure you are willing to share the same information you are asking for.

* Does your newsroom share back with the people who have engaged with you to help them understand what mattered to them, then changed its editorial strategy accordingly? It also conducted regular reader surveys, polls, and focus groups to get more information.

When employees from underrepresented groups don’t truly have a seat at the table and the power to influence decision-making, efforts to diversify newsrooms can easily fall into the traps of tokenism, marginalization, or exploitation. Including more perspectives in the editorial decision-making process — and basing editors’ judgments on audience needs defined by research and data, not only their own experiences — can help newsrooms avoid those traps. And importantly, bringing engagement insights to editorial meetings also enables staff the treasured time to be creative, theorize, experiment, and learn together — which supports the entire organization in becoming even more inclusive.

In short, news organizations won’t be able to make real progress on inclusion and equity unless and until they operationalize engagement with their communities and make it part of the core workflow.

* How do you incorporate the kind of inclusive engagement into your newsroom that supports a more inclusive workplace? There is no perfect formula for each newsroom, but there are durable principles and techniques that you can draw from to create your own strategy. And there are journalism support organizations that teach these practices.

**Ask yourself the following questions:**

- What opportunities do individuals outside of your newsroom have to shape your stories and coverage decisions?

There are a variety of approaches to draw on here, from more traditional options — such as creating community advisory boards, newsrooms make decisions based primarily on those metrics — rewarding and repeating the same type of coverage that has “done well” in the past, creating yet another barrier to greenlighting stories that are important to smaller segments of its audience.

Engaging the audiences you want to serve, not only your largest current audiences, is a key way around this. It may mean challenging the perspectives and pitches of reporters and editors from more diverse groups to be accepted.

Furthermore, if a newsroom’s audience is less diverse, those stories for the existing audience will tend to perform better in terms of absolute metrics. This reinforces the status quo when newsrooms make decisions based primarily on those metrics — rewarding and repeating the same type of coverage that has “done well” in the past, creating yet another barrier to greenlighting stories that are important to smaller segments of its audience.

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“He Was Understanding Their Souls”
Celebrating the extraordinary life and work of Brent Renaud, NF ‘19, who was killed reporting in Ukraine

Brent Renaud, a gifted documentary filmmaker and photographer and a member of the Nieman class of 2019, was shot and killed in Irpin, Ukraine, a suburb of Kyiv, on March 13, 2022. He was 50 years old.

At the time, Brent was working on a film about the experiences of refugees and migrants in 10 countries around the world for Time Studios. While in Ukraine, he wanted to document people leaving their homes and fleeing their country as a result of the Russian invasion and provide them with an iPhone, with which they could record their journey wherever it took them. He had already been filming the project for a year, in Africa, Europe, and South America, working with individuals fleeing the climate crisis, war, and gender violence.

When he was killed, Brent was with his Nieman classmate Juan Arredondo, another visual journalist, who was also wounded in the attack but received medical care and is recovering from his wounds. In a video interview posted on Twitter by Annalisa Camilli, a journalist for Internazionale, Juan indicates that the two men came under attack while traveling by car to reach an area where refugees were crossing a bridge.

According to The New York Times, Anton Gerashchenko, an adviser to Ukraine’s interior minister, said in a statement that Brent “paid with his life for attempting to expose the insidiousness, cruelty and ruthlessness of the aggressor.”

The Nieman community is deeply saddened by this tragic death. Nieman curator Ann Marie Lipinski said: “Brent’s filmmaking was exceptional and what made it so was not just his abundant skill but a kindness and deep humanity he brought to his work. He told us that what he sought in his journalism was ‘thoughtful stories about disenfranchised people,’ and he lived up to that credo every day. His death is a devastating loss.”

A native of Little Rock, Arkansas, Brent began his career covering the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the war in Afghanistan. Since then, he had worked mostly with his brother Craig on film projects including the HBO heroin documentary “Dope Sick Love” and the TV series “Off to War,” about a National Guard unit deployed to Iraq. He covered the earthquake in Haiti, cartel violence in Mexico, the youth refugee crisis in Central America, political upheaval in Egypt, and the war on extremism in Africa and the Middle East. In 2015, he received a Peabody Award for the Vice News series “Last Chance High,” about a therapeutic school in Chicago.

At Harvard, Brent studied the effects of trauma and mental and emotional illness on rates of poverty and violence in America.

Brent’s Nieman classmates remember him not just as an extraordinary journalist but as an extraordinary person — humble, sensitive, gentle, smart, funny. “He came to his work with a human-first attitude,” says Mary Ellen Klas, capital bureau chief for The Miami Herald in Tallahassee, Florida. He conveyed to his subjects “not just that he was listening to their words, but that he was understanding their souls, who they are.”

Kael Hinek, leader of the data and visuals team at CNN, recalls coming away from every conversation with Brent “having learned something new, discovering some wild story, finding out some fascinating thing about his life. He never bragged. He was just this kind, compassionate presence.”

Brent loved animals — especially his dog, Chai — and was devoted to animal rights. He also loved old motorcycles and constructed a hybrid studio/repair shop, where he could edit videos and tinker with his beloved bikes. Though instinctively shy, Brent experimented with stand-up comedy, and after his Nieman fellowship, took up teaching visual journalism in addition to continuing his filmmaking practice.

Though Brent came to his Nieman fellowship an accomplished visual journalist, he quickly revealed himself as a powerful writer as well. “His writing was superb,” says author Steve Almond, who reaches the Nieman narrative nonfiction class for fellows. “He was shy and didn’t speak a lot in class, but when he did his comments were astonishingly sensitive and precise. We all kind of waited for Brent to weigh in — he had that kind of quiet power of insight.”

For someone with such a natural gift for connecting to other people’s stories, Brent was sometimes hesitant to share his own. But, early on in the fellowship, when Brent spoke movingly about his own struggles to connect, he “cracked something open in the class,” says photographer Samantha Appleton. “He opened us all up to being more vulnerable together. He changed the chemistry of the entire class.”

Matteo Ferraresi, managing editor of the Italian newspaper Domani, remembers Brent telling him, “You’ve got to love what you report on,” challenging the principle that you need to keep a distance from your subjects to report fairly. Brent was all about empathy. He believed he had to really enter your life to really tell your story.

Through his personality and presence, as well as the stories he told, Brent entered the lives of his classmates and colleagues at Nieman in ways that will not be forgotten.
Kari Howard: An editor who loved good stories and storytellers
Howard, who worked at the LA Times, Reuters, and Nieman, died at 59

BY JAMES GEARY

If told a few friends but asked them to keep it under their hats,” Kari Howard told the LA Times, “I didn’t think anyone would get the joke.”

Kari Howard died last week of cancer at her home in Los Angeles. She was 59.

Kari Howard, who worked in newsrooms across the globe, was a complex storyteller in her own right. As an editor at the LA Times, she helped shape the paper’s coverage of the George Floyd protests in Minneapolis, and as an executive producer at PBS’s “Frontline,” she oversaw documentaries that shed light on the country’s racial injustices.

In a career that spanned four decades, Howard worked at The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, and NBC News, among other institutions. She was known for her resilience in the face of adversity and her unwavering commitment to storytelling.

Howard was born in Los Angeles in 1962 and grew up in the city’s Koreatown neighborhood. She attended the University of California, Los Angeles, where she majored in English and minored in journalism.

After graduation, Howard worked as a reporter for the Los Angeles Times, where she covered the city’s black community. She later moved to The New York Times, where she worked as an editor on the paper’s national news desk.

In 1997, Howard joined the LA Times as an editor, and she quickly rose through the ranks to become the paper’s vice president of strategy and operations. She later served as the paper’s chief audience officer.

In 2016, Howard was named Voice of America’s new streaming newscast, Digital Watch, a four-part WBUR series that examines the manipulation of public opinion on social media.

In addition to her work at the LA Times, Howard was known for her contributions to The Nieman Foundation, where she served as an editor on the foundation’s annual report on the state of journalism.

Howard was also a co-founder of Altavoz Lab, a nonprofit that works to strengthen reporting and community engagement in the U.S. and in Latin America.

“Kari Howard was a true story teller,” said Steve Myers, the executive director of Nieman’s Local Reporting Network. “She had a unique ability to draw people into stories, to make them care about the issues at hand.”

Howard is survived by her husband, Robert Caro, to whom she was married for 22 years, and their two children, Benjamin and Will. She is also survived by her parents, Richard and Carole Howard, and her brother, Michael Howard.

A memorial service will be held later this month. The family asks that donations be made in Kari Howard’s memory to Altavoz Lab or to the Nieman Foundation’s Local Reporting Network.

The Nieman Foundation is committed to supporting the work of Kari Howard and all those who strive to bring truth to light.
CELEBRATING 75 YEARS OF NIEMAN REPORTS

It seems to me that the labor field will be of prime importance because the industrial society in which we live is so complex, it has so many bottlenecks; there are so many keys at every point which may lead to disaster that the mechanism in the machinery has to be understood.”

This quote comes not from our recent story on why the labor beat is resurgent, but from remarks made by pioneering labor reporter Louis Stark published in the January 1942 issue of Nieman Reports. Stark was right about the importance of covering labor, then and now. Steven Greenhouse’s piece for us shows just how complex labor issues have become — from the impact of Covid-19 and the MeToo movement to the need for child care — and how important it is for the machinery of labor to be understood.

Nieman Reports turned 75 in February. The premiere issue appeared in February 1947. A lot has changed in journalism since Nieman Reports was founded as a quarterly print magazine by a group of Nieman alumni, but our mission as they originally defined it has not: “It has no pattern, formula or policy except to seek to serve the purpose of the Nieman Foundation ‘to promote standards of journalism in America.’”

That mission has been extended beyond America, of course. With Russian President Vladimir Putin’s barbaric invasion of Ukraine and the threat to the country’s free press it brings, we continue to highlight efforts to create independent, sustainable news outlets in places ruled by or emerging from authoritarian regimes.

To mark our birthday, we will be looking back at how our archives, like Louis Stark’s assessment of the labor beat, with more recent coverage of the same issues, like Steven Greenhouse’s piece on covering the workplace.

In the summer of 1979, Nieman Reports published a special issue on women and journalism, featuring reflections from Mary Ellen Leary and Charlotte Fritz-Henry, the first two female Niemans (class of 1946) and a piece on groundbreaking investigative reporter Nelly By. More recently, Nieman Reports published two cover packages on female newsroom leadership, Where Are the Women? in 2014 and Where Are the Mothers? in 2017.

In the Spring 1956 issue, let reporter and 1951 Nieman fellow Simeon Booker’s account of the Emmett Till trial related how Black and white reporters worked together to cover the effort to find three key witnesses to Till’s horrific murder. In the summer of 2020, after George Floyd’s horrific murder, Nieman Reports published a collection of pieces detailing how newsrooms are fundamentally rethinking how stories are covered — and by whom.

Nieman Reports didn’t always get things right. That first 1947 cover story, “What’s Wrong with the Newspaper Reader,” is marred by sexist language and offensive descriptions of India’s post-war struggle for independence from Great Britain. We hope our then-and-now story pairings show, though, how we can, have done, and will continue to do better.

Over the next 12 months, you can follow along with the celebration on Twitter (@NiemanReports) and Instagram (@niemanfoundation). You can also drop us a line at nreditor@harvard.edu. We’d love to hear from you.

Nieman Reports published its first issue in Feb. 1947 (left). Nieman Reports has since reported on a myriad of issues, from press freedom to labor to Black Lives Matter (below).
Through Diversity, We Find People’s Full Humanity
Why opening up documentary filmmaking is important for both the storytellers and the communities we cover
BY DAVE MAyers

I probably shouldn’t hire you,” the co-bureau chief said near the end of our interview. I couldn’t argue as she went through the reasons — I was new to the continent and South Africa and didn’t speak any of the local languages. It was the summer of 2009, and I had just moved to Johannesburg, partly to teach multimedia journalism at Wits University and partly to pick up any freelance work I could.

“But you’re young, you’re Black, and you’d be connected to a different community than we are,” she said. With that, I was brought on board as the videographer and researcher for the Johannesburg desk of The New York Times. My new boss was pointing to the importance she saw in having different voices in our little outpost of a newsroom. Celia Duggar and her husband Barry Bearak shared the bureau and are still some of the best journalists I’ve ever known. But there were also aspects of life in South Africa that they would never get; there were stories I’d be closer to simply because I was young and Black.

Four years in South Africa, working in and teaching journalism, made me hyperaware of other coverage of the country than we are,” she said. “I was part of a hiring wave that created the most diverse workplace I’ve ever seen. It’s hard to overstate just how transformative the people in the newsroom were to Vice’s overall coverage.

But what really drove home the importance of a diverse newsroom to me was our reporting on the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd. At Minneapolis was convulsing in protest, our crew sat on a porch interviewing Valerie Castle. Four years earlier, police had shot and killed her son Philando during a traffic stop. She had opened up immediately to our crew — three Black men and a Mexican-American woman. Castle buzzed with moral clarity and righteous anger that yet another Black man had been killed at the hands of the police just a few miles away. “My son died, so that you, and you and you,” she said as she pointed to us, “could see what’s really happening in this world.” I was silent. We all were.

It was a moment that wouldn’t have been possible had the man been killed as so many others in Minneapolis. I had thought the same thing the day before when Minnesota State Troopers had arrested us at gunpoint. We were released early the next morning and the charges were eventually dropped. Our work, along with that of our colleagues reporting from around the country, was recognized with an Emmy. But more significantly, it clarified the importance of having people from a range of backgrounds telling these stories. I applied for a Nieman fellowship to look at ways to open up documentary filmmaking to underrepresented communities. I’ve spent the past several months trying to see why the industry looks the way it does.

I’ve spent the past several months trying to see why the industry looks the way it does

I began covering the refugee crisis on the Polish border for The New York Times on the very first day of the Russian invasion in Ukraine. At the very beginning, in the first day or two, I would see mainly calm women. Usually, some children with some kind of overhead luggage, small bags. Most of them seemed like they knew where they were going and how they were going to get there.

The border wasn’t really organized yet. They were confident crossing it. It looked almost like they hoped to get back to Ukraine, even within a week. I knew that most of these women left behind their sons, fathers, partners, and husbands, because Ukraine announced that their loved ones are left behind, even more so. And Romania

I met more people like that — people who have no idea. But there are also fewer people who will mention that their loved ones are left behind, even though they are. This was the way that people were coming now. I met more people like that — people who have no idea. But there are also fewer people who will mention that their loved ones are left behind, even though they are. This was the big change. The first women, with the hand luggage, would quite often complain that their husbands weren’t allowed to come. With these people, you don’t hear that. They just come. They want to feel safe, and they want to find any place where they can wait for what’s next.