

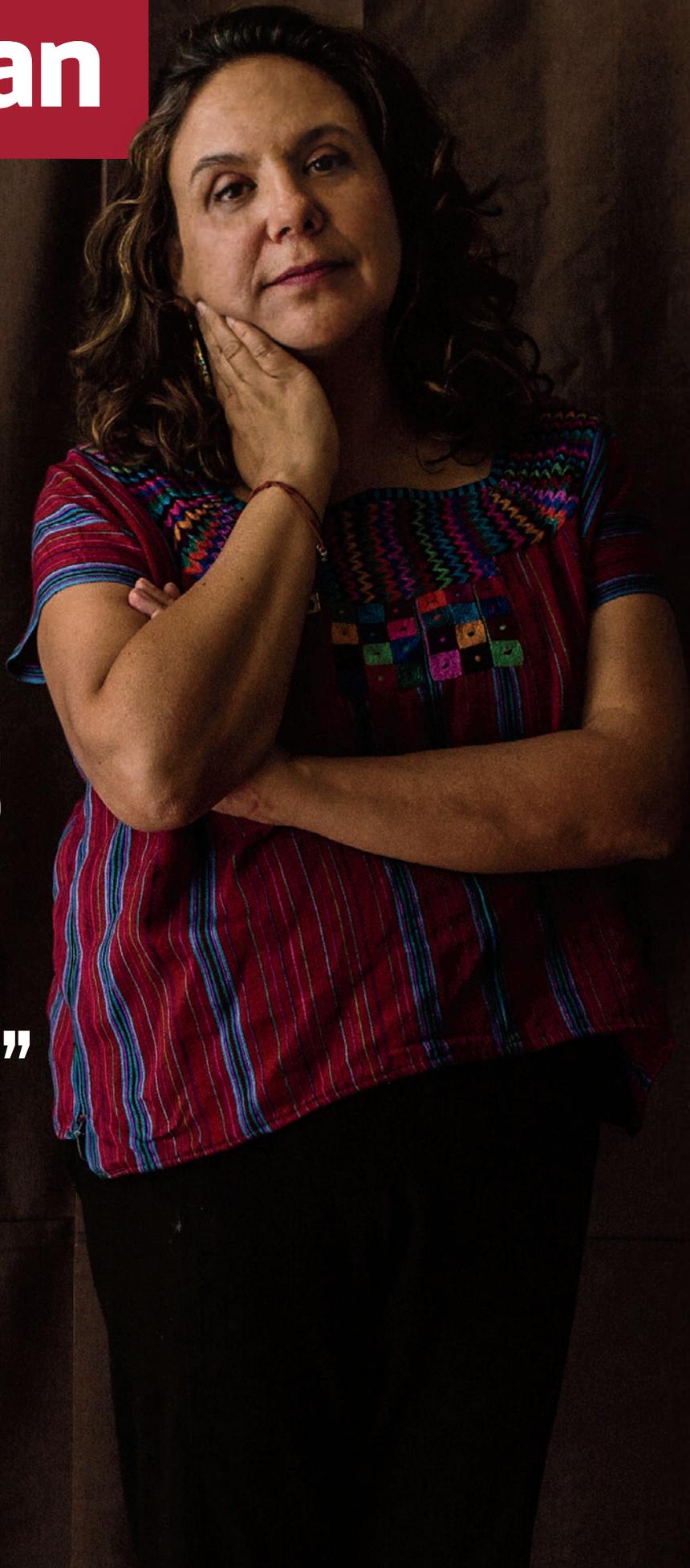
NIEMAN REPORTS

Nieman

**“THE TRUTH IS
NOT KILLED
BY KILLING
JOURNALISTS”**

**HOW NEWSROOMS
ARE RESPONDING TO THREATS
AGAINST JOURNALISM —
AND AGAINST DEMOCRACY**

**MARCELA TURATI
INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST
MEXICO**



“IN THE
FACE OF
A TYRANT,
YOU CAN’T —
MUSTN’T — BLINK”

GLENDIA GLORIA
CO-FOUNDER AND EXECUTIVE
EDITOR OF RAPPLER,
THE PHILIPPINES



NiemanReports

The Nieman Foundation
for Journalism at Harvard University
www.niemanreports.org

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One Francis Avenue, Cambridge,
MA 02138-2098, 617-496-6308,
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Periodicals postage paid at
Boston, Massachusetts and additional
entries

SUBSCRIPTIONS/BUSINESS
617-496-6299, nreports@harvard.edu

Subscription \$25 a year,
\$40 for two years;
add \$10 per year for foreign airmail.
Single copies \$7.50.

*Please address all subscription
correspondence to:*
One Francis Avenue,
Cambridge, MA 02138-2098
and change of address information to:
P.O. Box 4951, Manchester, NH 03108
ISSN Number 0028-9817

Postmaster: Send address changes to
Nieman Reports P.O. Box 4951,
Manchester, NH 03108

Nieman Reports (USPS #430-650)
is published quarterly by
the Nieman Foundation
at Harvard University,
One Francis Avenue,
Cambridge, MA 02138-2098

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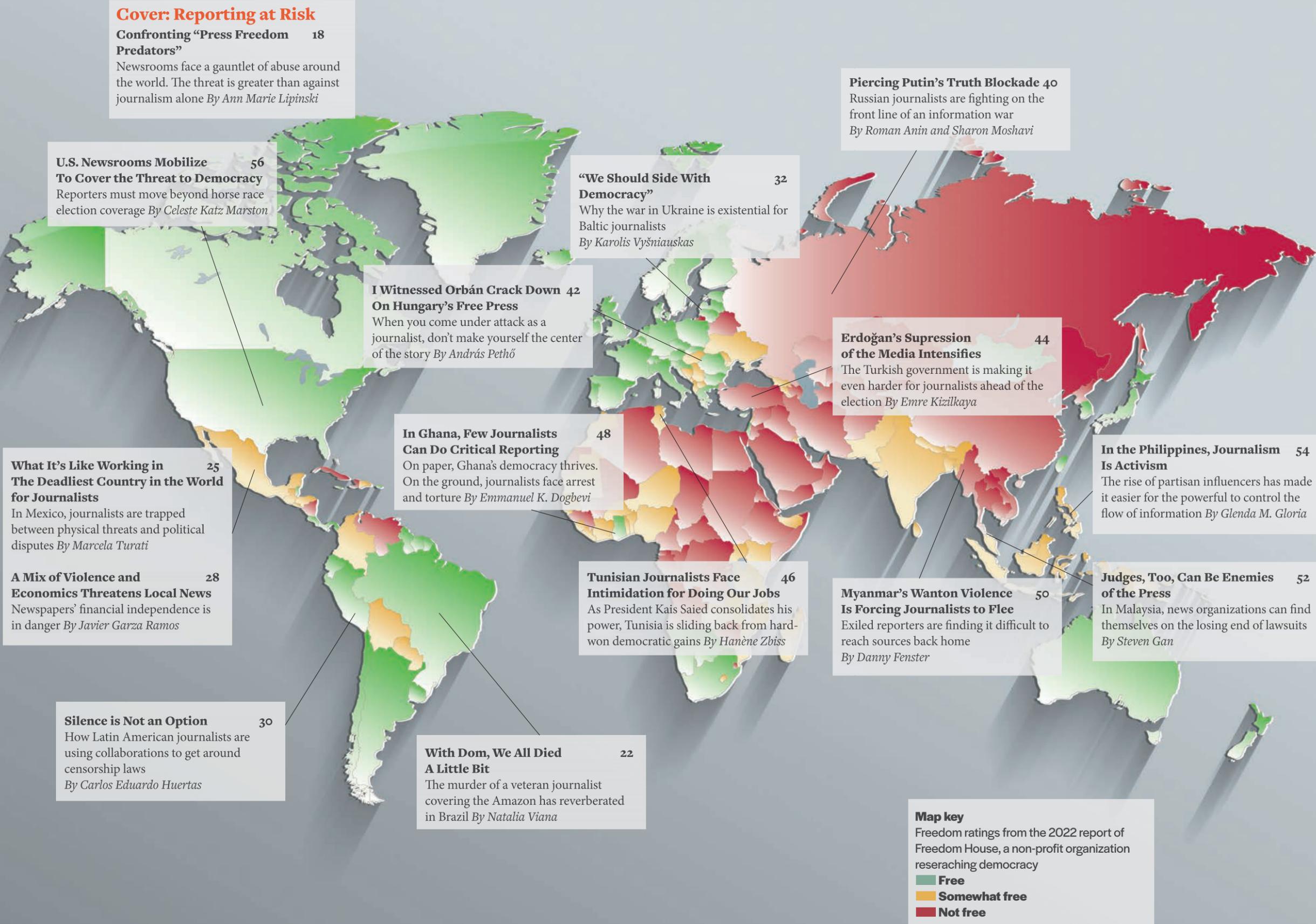
Danny Fenster, editor-at-large for Frontier Myanmar, an investigative news magazine, was imprisoned by Myanmar's junta for nearly six months in 2021 for his reporting on military-linked businesses. Previously, Fenster wrote about politics, race and culture in Detroit and southern Louisiana.

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Front cover: Mexican investigative reporter Marcela Turati photographed by Ginnette Riquelme

Inside front cover: Glenda M. Gloria, executive editor of Rappler in the Philippines, photographed by Franz Lopez

Back cover: Emmanuel K. Dogbevi, managing editor of Ghana Business Journal, photographed by Paul Ninson

Companies Rely On Journalism To Not Cover Tech. Here's How To “Security guru” Bruce Schneier on good data hygiene for journalists, how newsrooms can protect their staff from cyberattacks, and more

For many, the world of data and cybersecurity can feel nebulous. But as abstract as blockchain, spyware, and Big Tech may seem, they have major implications for the everyday person's privacy — and for journalism, on how reporters can incorporate tech into their work, how newsrooms can protect their staff from cyberattacks, and how the media can make complicated data-driven stories digestible to audiences.

Bruce Schneier, dubbed the “security guru” by *The Economist*, broke this all down in a seminar with the Nieman Foundation in April. He is the author of 14 books, including the New York Times best-seller “Data and Goliath: The Hidden Battles to Collect Your Data and Control Your World,” along with hundreds of articles, essays, and academic papers. Schneier also writes the newsletter *CryptoGram* and runs the popular blog *Schneier on Security*. He is a fellow at the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University, a fellow at the Belfer Center at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, and a board member of the Electronic Frontier Foundation.

Edited excerpts:

On writing good data-driven journalism

I need you to be a little bit good in data science or know how to hire a data scientist when there's data science-driven journalism.

I'm thinking of the New York Times report from a couple of weeks ago, how they proved that it was the Russians that conducted the genocide [in Bucha, Ukraine]. They were able to pull satellite photos, do pattern matching, and determine the dates on which bodies appeared on the streets.

That's data-driven journalism. That's fantastic work. It probably wouldn't have been possible 10 years ago.

My chief skill, I have found, has been [as a] translator. My first book translates math to programmers. My current work translates tech policy to regular people.

If you read my essays and op-eds, I'm constantly trying to write accessibly to the average intelligent person about tech topics — and make them understand why Google tracking matters, or why the safety of the Internet connection on your refrigerator matters.

One of the problems we have in tech is [that] techies write like techies. Someone needs to translate.

On spyware

This stuff [spyware] has been going on for decades, and we've been writing about it for decades. [The New Yorker's “How Democracies Spy on Their Citizens”] is not the first mainstream article on an NSO Group. You can probably find New York Times articles going back three to four years.

What's happening is it's becoming more mainstream. That software spies on you isn't new. That's as old as the public Internet. That's the mid-90s.

In mainstream journalism, I think they've been writing about it for a while. I don't even think I'd say they've finally woken up. It's because it's taking on a new urgency with the rise of authoritarianism.

We're seeing journalists being hacked, arrested, tortured, and occasionally murdered because of this software. It's becoming more real in that respect, but it is not new. None of this is new. There is a new publicity.

You could argue this topic still isn't mainstream, and we have never seen

a presidential debate question on this topic. There are legislators who think it's important, but it's not a campaign issue. That makes it a secondary issue even with everything that's happening today.

What can the press do about it? I want you to report on it. I want these articles to make the headlines. It's hard. The world is such a dumpster fire that this probably isn't going to be above the fold very often, but once in a while, it should be. It shouldn't just be when the Chinese [break into] Equifax and steal the data of 140.7 million Americans.

On holding Big Tech accountable

We're seeing this techno-optimism: “Elon Musk is going to save Twitter and save the world.” [We've] seen the moral panics: “Oh, my god, Internet porn, everything's going to be bad.” They're both caricatures of what's going on, which is complex and nuanced.

How could a journalist expose Theranos as a massive fraud? It took a whistleblower inside the company to figure it out and then talk to a journalist.

One of the things I do in my [cyber-security policy] classes is have the students really look at the press releases that these companies produce. Lots of it is PR bullshit faithfully regurgitated as news, when it's not. How do we [acquire] the critical skills to recognize PR bullshit for what it is?

The CEOs of tech companies go to a congressional hearing, and everybody wants their autograph. This is not going to be the recipe for successful oversight. This is a bigger problem. It's the problem that we just don't have the governance structures in place, and the tech companies, because they're paying all the money, have all the expertise.

I wrote an op-ed that criticized Microsoft. And I had trouble publishing it with think tanks and policy organizations, because they were afraid of offending Microsoft. The company is basically buying the silence of NGOs. This seems bad. It's very hard to speak truth to power when power is paying your bills.

On blockchain

I wish you'd do good journalism on this. It's hard. The New York Times published “The Latecomers Guide to Crypto” a few weeks ago. It's terrible. Some group did “The Annotated Latecomers Guide to Crypto,” which tries to put some balance into that article.

Cryptocurrency — which is built on blockchain — is speculative. It's



Bruce Schneier spoke to Nieman Fellows on how media could hold Big Tech accountable

embarrassingly insecure. It's an investment bubble. Blockchain has no actual value. These are not controversial views. Everybody in computer security says this. Blockchain is very much a product of Silicon Valley libertarian crypto-bros and is their way to stick it to the man. That's pretty much all it is.

If you ask me if there's any journalistic uses for the blockchain, the answer is no. Not one. Anytime you see a journalism application that uses the blockchain, look at it and remove the blockchain; you'll get all the value, and it'll be better. Blockchain does not give you security, nor does it reduce trust. It is all hype.

On how journalists can become more tech savvy

First, protect yourselves. The Committee to Protect Journalists is a good resource for tech to protect you and your sources. We have a famous early hacking attempt [of] China hacking The New York Times, trying to get the name of a source for an anti-corruption story.

We're having a lot of journalists being targeted by governments for the work they're doing. I worry less about U.S. journalists, more about journalists inside those countries and the sources of U.S. journalists inside those countries. Educate yourself on the tech. The Electronic

Frontier Foundation has a security self-defense guide. Look at the resources and use secure communications. Download Signal. Then think about using SecureDrop as a way for whistleblowers to give you information securely.

Think about your data hygiene. Think about where your data is stored. Covering the news is a lot harder because I want you to have the skills to be an intelligent analyst of these stories. I think the solution is going to be putting technologists on your staff. The New York Times has data scientists on their staff. This is critical.

Knowing tech is a skill set. There's a class-action lawsuit going on right now where Google is being accused of basically deceiving people about incognito mode, its private browsing mode. The merits of that case are all about the technical details of what Google can do compared to the statements it made in its privacy policy, in the press, and to its Chrome users of what they would do.

That's a tech story. You can't report it properly unless you can understand the technology. Otherwise, you're going to mindlessly repeat the positions of the plaintiff or the defendants. I don't want you to do that. Companies rely on the fact that you can't [parse the nuances of the technology]. Governments do, too.

On why Americans are less concerned about privacy

In the United States, people tend to mistrust governments and trust corporations. In Europe, people tend to mistrust corporations and trust government. Europe has far fewer controls on government surveillance than the U.S.

The E.U. has far more rules against corporate surveillance than the U.S. Why do we allow so much [corporate privacy invasion in the U.S.]? Largely because it's not salient. We know it's true, but when we pick up our phone, we don't say, “I'm going to put the most sophisticated tracking device ever invented in my pocket.” We put our phone in our pocket.

When we use Google, we don't really think about that Google knows what kind of porn everybody likes. We just use it. That lack of salience makes it normal.

Privacy is abstract. Abstract rights are things we tend not to notice until they're gone.

Also, a lot of this tech is driven by middle-class white American men, which is going to lead to a certain type of thinking that doesn't translate when you start shifting power structures.

On how newsrooms should protect their journalists

I want you to invest in the tech tools to keep you safe. Journalism is getting more dangerous. The average female political reporter in the United States is being harassed. This is now what normal looks like.

Journalism is becoming a more dangerous profession. That's bad. I need quality journalism, so I want you to go back and say, “Hey, these threats are real. We need to invest in journalist protection.”

Then also look at tech-driven journalism. A lot of news stories can be uncovered through data science. Latanya Sweeney, [at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government], has a class called “Data Science to Change the World.” She's the one who used data science to figure out that Uber was discriminating against disabled passengers. That's a real story.

We had an MIT student who's tracking Russian oligarchs. He's tracking their planes using public data, putting it on the web. We're detecting Russian troop movements through the location data from online games. That's a new world. That's interesting. Let's use that. ■

What About the Boys? The Sex Trafficking of Young Males

Jenifer McKim, NF '08, and Phillip Martin, NF '98, detail their groundbreaking series, 'Unseen'

We have reported on the dangerous and troubling world of sex trafficking for nearly two decades, writing about the domestic sex trafficking of minors and the commercial sexual exploitation of foreign workers in this country's nail salons and massage parlors — two angles that focused on female victims.

But neither of us before had focused deeply on the plight of boys and young men in the dark and dangerous world of sex trafficking. Until now.

The problem is that there's little data to show what's really happening. But a source who had followed our work reached out to ask, repeatedly: What about the boys?

We decided to look into it. We started with that source, Boston-area social worker Steven Procopio, who has strived for more than a decade to put more focus on the world of trafficked males. Procopio has long maintained that the reality of exploited boys is even more underground than that of girls because of



Jenifer McKim and Phillip Martin's series "Unseen" shares the stories of boys, like Jose Alfaro, who have been victims of sex trafficking

toxic masculinity, shame, and a destructive skepticism that boys can be victims at all. During our first interview, Procopio brought with him Christopher Bates, a 26-year-old survivor who bravely told us his story of living on his own as a teen, selling his body to survive.

We continued our inquiry for more than a year, talking to advocates, government officials, and researchers. We brought in Jenifer's investigative journalism clinic at Boston University to increase our reach. We talked to researchers who found that more than a third of young people involved in the U.S. sex trade were boys and young men.

Most importantly, we talked to more

than a dozen survivors who trusted us to tell their stories. They told us about selling their bodies to avoid homelessness and pay bills, their bodies seemingly their only currency in a world that abandoned them. We focused on how Black, brown, and LGBTQ youth are disproportionately affected. In the end we published a six-part series titled, "Unseen: The Boy Victims of the Sex Trade."

In May, our series was recognized for three regional Edward R. Murrow awards, including in the investigative reporting category. We are hoping that this attention will further advance a focus on a vulnerable population that has long been overlooked. ■

Making the Biggest Investigative Journalism Project in History Accessible to the Audience

Reuben Fischer-Baum, NF '22, on his 'slice' of the Pandora Papers

I'm a graphics editor at The Washington Post, which means that I lead a team that creates visuals like maps and data visualizations, as well as custom interactive web pages. In 2021, my beat was business and technology, so I was looped into the Pandora Papers — a cache of nearly 12 million leaked records from 14 different offshore service providers — to find opportunities where graphics could help elucidate the investigation.

The Pandora Papers were a challenge

to analyze because of the sheer breadth of information. The Pandora Papers, for comparison, came from a single provider and were more easily indexed. That meant that it was difficult to tackle some of the summary questions that we were initially interested in, like: How many properties in Manhattan are held in these sorts of offshore trusts? Every entity in the documents had to be individually reported out.

We ended up taking a few visual approaches. Our most important graphic

"Comadres al Aire:" The Podcast That Talks To Immigrants, Not About Them

Valeria Fernandez, a 2021 visiting fellow, is trying to create community at a time when the world feels scary and distant

We were barely starting the first season of our Spanish-language podcast to talk about health for immigrant women and non-binary and trans people, when I broke the news to my partner in crime: "I'm pregnant!" Maritza L. Félix was happy for me. The beauty of having a co-producer that is also a mom and your comadre — a trustworthy and intimate friend — is that she gets it.

It was January 2021, Covid-19 vaccines were not yet available to us in Arizona, and this added another layer to our production challenges. Would I feel safe conducting interviews in person? Would we be OK locking ourselves into a studio for hours to record tracks? Maritza was patient and understood the extra anxiety I had because of the pandemic. And we got creative, using Zoom, long microphone poles, and masks — lots of masks.

The gestation of "Comadres al Aire" began amid the pandemic like that, springing from the conversations between our extended families of comadres. As journalists, we drew from the relationships we built over the years to cover the challenges faced by undocumented immigrants in Arizona — one of them, the disparities in access to our healthcare system. Most importantly, we found a place to pour that human part of ourselves so often neglected because of the daily grind of covering the news.

Combined, we have almost 40 years of experience in journalism. We're both



Valeria Fernandez (left) and Maritza L. Felix's podcast seeks to reach across the digital divide

immigrants. I'm from Uruguay. She's from Mexico. We both grew our careers in the U.S., writing in Spanish for an immigrant audience — people like us. We also embarked on a cross-over journey to write in English so our work could have an impact on policy change. At least, that's what I thought. But, after a decade of doing that, my heart needed the purpose of journalism to be grounded in community. A type of journalism that doesn't talk about immigrants as "them" because you are them.

We like to say that on Comadres we talk about del vientre al subconsciente — from the womb to the subconscious — and that we are among friends (estamos en confianza). We're reaching people on the

internet and over the radio airwaves with Radio Bilingue, reaching those still affected by the digital divide. We've been slowly building a village at a time when the world has felt more scary and distant. The voices that are joining our podcasts — doctors, therapists, mothers, lovers, abuelitas, midwives, and activists — are building a community of mutual aid to change the narratives about our health and confront inequalities. We're gearing up for our next season, slated to launch in early September, and we're not two comadres anymore. We are a village. We listened, and we are putting into action what our community asked for. Showing that change comes when we talk to our communities, not about them. ■

TOP: MEREDITH NIEMAN/GBH; BOTTOM: COURTESY OF VALERIA FERNANDEZ



The Pandora Papers were a challenge to analyze because of the sheer breadth of information

We counted pieces of art stolen from Cambodia and hidden behind trusts, making their way to museums around the

world. And we created contextual graphics so readers could understand the size and scope of the leak itself.

Large investigations like the Pandora Papers are a group effort, and in the end about 60 journalists from The Washington Post alone worked on this project. I myself had to hand off the graphic coverage when my Nieman fellowship began. Our work was just one slice of the storytelling, but it was part of a rich package that elevated these stories for our readers. ■

WHY
NEWSROOMS
ARE
COLLABORATING

TO
TAKE ON
AMBITIOUS
REPORTING
PROJECTS

By working together,
news organizations can
expand both
their resources
and reach

BY STEFANIE MURRAY
ILLUSTRATION BY ADRIÀ FRUITOS



W

WHEN THE (BERGEN) RECORD in northern New Jersey began tracking Covid-19

deaths and writing profiles about the deceased in March 2020, the task seemed manageable.

Jim O'Neill, a longtime editor at The Record, handled the project. He combed through obituaries throughout the state, took note of deaths reported by other news outlets, and recorded any names shared by state or health officials. Then he assigned profiles of the deceased to a team of reporters.

But as the death toll across the state surged — nursing home deaths were especially ballooning across the state — O'Neill's simple spreadsheet was amassing hundreds and hundreds of rows. Hours of his day were being consumed with tracking death. His reporters couldn't take on many more profiles.

I first heard about the project during a call with The Record's top editor, Daniel Sforza. I reached out to talk about ideas that my organization, the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University, had about supporting journalists in Jersey during the early days of Covid-19.

"You guys are doing all that yourselves?" I remember asking Sforza. "Do you want help?"

Several weeks later we had a memorandum of understanding, a standalone website, \$10,000 in funding from The Nicholson Foundation, a New Jersey-based philanthropic organization, and a dozen other media partners on board as we worked together to shift that project, *Loved and Lost*, into a statewide journalism collaboration. More partners were added over the next two months.

Such collaborations don't always come together so easily. But they've become very common across the U.S. and around the world.

Since 2017, the center has been tracking collaborative journalism projects as part of a broader program to study and advocate for more partnership in journalism. We have identified more than 40 permanent collaboratives in the U.S. alone, a few of which have be-

come their own non-profit organizations. We have also tracked more than 600 collaborative efforts that range from one-time reporting projects to deep cross-border investigations in a public database.

More than a half-dozen Pulitzers have been awarded to collaborations since 2016. Millions of dollars are flowing in to support collaborative journalism efforts. Given the financial and political pressures on newsrooms and the multidisciplinary nature of the biggest challenges facing us, collaborations are — and will continue to be — vital to the news industry and civil society.

Here's a look at why collaborations are important and how to make them work.

WHAT DEFINES A COLLABORATION in journalism can vary widely depending on who you ask. But in a 2017 research paper titled "Comparing Models of Collaborative Journalism," Sarah Stonbely defined collaborative journalism as "a cooperative arrangement (formal or informal) between two or more news and information organizations, which aims to supplement each organization's resources and maximize the impact of the content produced."



Stonbely, research director at the center, also noted that "Collaborative journalism is not to be confused with 'citizen-', 'participatory-', 'engaged-', 'public-', or other types of journalism that solicit information from the public or consider interaction with the public a cornerstone practice."

This definition is expansive in that it includes efforts that others may have long defined as straightforward partnerships — such as common arrangements between local commercial television stations and newspapers where the paper runs the TV station's weather forecasts, and in turn the TV station uses the paper's headlines and reporting in its broadcasts. Yet it is narrow in that it focuses entirely on journalist-to-journalist initiatives.

The current growth of collaborations the news industry in the U.S. is experiencing, however, has roots in two key years: 2009 and 2016. In 2009, the Knight Foundation gave \$2.4 million for a series of nine collaborations led by J-Lab, an organization dedicated to funding new approaches to journalism; four remained active nearly a decade later. That was also the year that the Corporation for Public Broadcasting began funding journalistic collaborations; since then, it has invested tens of millions of dollars in more than 30 local and regional partnerships. And, 2016

was the year that the groundbreaking Panama Papers series was published, led by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists. ICIJ was later awarded a Pulitzer for that work, which opened many eyes to the power of a cross-border, multi-language collaboration.

"For mission-driven, public service newsrooms, collaborations tick all the most important boxes for participating outlets," said Bridget Thoreson, member collaborations editor at the Institute for Nonprofit News. "It makes reporting possible by pooling resources and increases the reach and impact of essential journalism. Our participants also appreciate the chance to connect and learn from each other, and as we build out this work, we look forward to working with them to increase revenue and sustainability from their efforts. I expect we'll continue to see more outlets adopt a collaborative approach as the best practices and benefits are shared across the field."

Collaborative journalism today is driven by a variety of factors, not the least of which is the seismic shift happening in the business model underpinning most news organizations. Newsrooms are facing resource challenges daily. Around 1,800 have closed since 2004 — more than 100 of which went under during the pandemic. Teaming up with another journalism organization can

A kayaker paddles in Lake Oroville, California, as water levels remain low due to continuing drought conditions. The collaboration Tapped Out, led by the Institute for Nonprofit News, spent more than three months reporting on water issues in the western United States

ETHAN SWOPE/AP PHOTO

COLLABORATIVE JOURNALISM TODAY IS DRIVEN BY A VARIETY OF FACTORS, NOT THE LEAST OF WHICH IS THE SEISMIC SHIFT HAPPENING IN THE BUSINESS MODEL

bring new resources to the table. It can also extend reach and increase impact. If one outlet has an amazing investigative team and another is a leader in podcasts, why not work together on an investigation that could best be told with audio?

Take, for example, Trump, Inc., a collaboration between ProPublica and WNYC Studios that leverages each other's strengths. ProPublica's expertise in data and investigative journalism combined with WNYC's deep knowledge of New York and Donald Trump — and its first-class audio production capabilities — created a comprehensive look at the innerworkings of the former president's business.

There's also been a critical change in the competitive landscape. When Americans want information, they go to Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Twitter, messaging apps, Google search results, and what their family and friends share. Journalists are competing against all those platforms — not each other.

Cross-border collaborations are thriving and increasing, especially in parts of Asia. In Asia, collaboration has been driven by a handful of factors, including mis- and disinformation surrounding several recent elections and cross-border work funded by the relatively new Judith Neilson Institute, a non-partisan philanthropic organization that supports journalism around the globe.

While elections are often an easy target for journalistic collaboration, more is being done around topics that affect large portions of the world's population, including climate change, human rights, misinformation, and democracy.

Covering Climate Now is the most remarkable example to date of global collaboration related to the environment. It includes more than 460 international partner outlets — including CBS News, The Times of India, the Ivory Coast Tribune, and Pacnews in Fiji — who share content and coordinate climate coverage. The topic is global in nature yet affects different parts of the Earth wildly differently, making it an excellent candidate for a large cross-border journalism collaboration.

There are many different ways for news organizations to work together. Stonbely's paper defined six key categories, divided by time and intensity. Collaborations can either be defined as temporary or ongoing, and they can be structured with content being created separately, content being co-created, or deep, multilevel integration.

Covering Climate Now, for example, is an ongoing and separate project. The initiative, co-funded by Columbia Journalism Review and The Nation, seeks to increase the amount of reporting done around the globe about climate change. Multiple times a year they coordinate coverage around a specific date or event such as a United Nations meeting related to climate. While stories are shared between partners, they are typically done by one organization or another. A frequent contributor is The Guardian, for example, which has the resources to do impactful climate coverage that is then picked up by other partners in the network.

A recent temporary and separate project is Tapped Out, an effort led by the Institute for Nonprofit News. Eight newsrooms — California Health Report, High

Country News, SJV Water, the Center for Collaborative Investigative Journalism, Circle of Blue, Columbia Insight, Ensia, and New Mexico In Depth — spent more than three months reporting on water issues in the western United States. All published their articles in May 2021. A grant from The Water Desk, a program designed to promote environmental journalism at the University of Colorado Boulder, along with INN sourcing participants, from its network, helped make the project possible.

A great example of a temporary and fully integrated project is the Pandora Papers, currently the largest investigative journalism collaboration on record. The Pandora Papers was led by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists and involved more than 600 journalists in 117 countries and territories over the course of almost two years. The work was based on a massive leak of tax files, including 11.9 million financial and legal records containing 2.94 terabytes of confidential information from 14 offshore service providers. In collaborations like this, ICIJ typically takes the lead in cleaning and preparing the data, gathering journalistic partners, and coordinating coverage.

Highly coordinated projects like the Pandora Papers — which published hundreds of investigative stories — can have far reaching impact around the world. In the Czech Republic, the billionaire prime minister, Andrej Babis, seemed on track to win another term in the fall of 2021 before the Pandora Papers revealed he “used shell companies in tax havens to buy a chateau on the French Riviera. He did not disclose the chateau or companies, as required by Czech law.” Babis was ousted after his party lost the majority in Parliament in October. At least 19 investigations were launched by the European Parliament, Europol, and 15 countries, according to the ICIJ.

TRACKING IMPACT IS CRITICAL for collaborations of all sizes. The Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project updates its “Impact to Date” page quarterly, and since 2011 has counted \$7.4 billion in monies seized or fines levied because of its collaborative reporting, along with 571 arrests, indictments, or sentences. The Institute for Nonprofit News publishes impact reports publicly for every collaboration it leads, tracking both reach and any outcomes its partners' reporting had.

While most journalists measure their impact in terms of legislative or judicial wins, there's also something to be said for how collaborative work impacts audiences. Research out of France's CrossCheck project a few years ago showed that its audience trusted the information it was receiving more because it came from a consortium of news outlets rather than a single entity. This was in part because news organizations on opposite ends of the political spectrum worked together.

Deciding what impact to focus on, how to measure it, and who gets credit can be one of the trickier aspects of working with other journalists. Indeed, there are a lot of small details — such as agreeing on deadlines, the order of bylines, and whose site the work will appear on first — involved in collaboration with outside parties that can complicate the process. When a collaboration fails,

it's often due to personality conflicts, editing disagreements, a lack of buy-in, technology that isn't compatible, or the lack of a clear plan to begin with.

That last one — a clear plan — is critical for any organization seeking to join a collaboration, especially if it's new territory. Questions that are easy to resolve at the beginning become behemoths that block progress: Are we publishing all of our stories at the same time? Will the stories be linked from one main location? How will we track traffic? Who will own the database we built together? To address these issues, many collaborations create shared memos, legal documents, or at least an outline of who's doing what and how it will work.

Liza Gross is vice president of practice change at Solutions Journalism Network and a leader in collaborative journalism in the U.S. Through the Local Media Project funded by the Knight Foundation and the Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Foundation, Gross has launched 14 collaboratives in cities and states across the country, including Philadelphia, Charlotte, N.C., New Hampshire, Northeast Ohio, Dallas, Sacramento, and more.

Her process to establish new collaboratives is methodical, requiring quite a bit of work upfront, including a thorough memorandum of understanding signed by all participating parties. “A significant level of commitment on the part of participating organizations is required,” she wrote in a piece for Knight Foundation titled “Collaboratives: You have to want to be there.”

“Journalists are action-oriented. Our first impulse is to throw ourselves into the fray. Let's all rush out and produce stories and then we will figure out how all this

works,” Gross says. “The key to a successful collaborative is to do exactly the opposite. Leaning into difficult conversations, hammering out an MOU around common values and purpose, designing clear processes, and assigning responsibilities can seem overwhelming, tedious, and may take months of meeting and arguing. But this initial prep work is crucial to ensure the long-term health of a collaborative arrangement.”

In 2022, collaboratives are becoming more sophisticated, diverse, and common. They've also evolved beyond editorial only. Collaboratives including Solving for Chicago and Oklahoma Media Center have joint fundraising campaigns and shared advertising. More collaboratives that were set up as ongoing efforts are transitioning into standalone entities such as Resolve Philly. And there is growing evidence of the power of collaborations involving journalists and civil society organizations, explored in a recent paper by Stonbely and Hanna Siemaszko, a research assistant at the Center for Cooperative Media, titled “Cross-field collaboration: How and why journalists and civil society organizations around the world are working together.”

As news organizations experiment with different types of collaborations — financial, editorial, temporary, and permanent — it's not just that the possibilities for providing better journalism for our audiences increase. Or that powerful entities will be held to account. These collaborations are a model for the future — and a path forward for news organizations that want to do ambitious journalism but lack the resources to support that work. ■

ProPublica's expertise in data and investigative journalism combined with WNYC's deep knowledge of New York and Donald Trump informed their collaboration Trump Inc.



ROY ROCHLIN/GETTY IMAGES

A NEW KIND OF PARTNERSHIP: JOURNALISTS AND CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS ARE TEAMING UP

BY SARAH STONBELY

ILLUSTRATION BY ADRIÀ FRUITOS

SINCE 2017, JOURNALISTS FROM EIGHT NEWSROOMS in five African countries have partnered with Code for Africa (CfA), a network of civic democracy and data journalism labs, to create sensors. Africa, a project that puts air quality sensors at schools, churches, and media houses in major cities across Africa to monitor pollution. Their goal was to collate data on the toxicity of the air and use that information to drive local reporting on the topic.

The project marks the first time that journalists and citizens have had information on how widespread pollution is in countries like Kenya and Tanzania, as well as hyper-local data on where it is worst. It confirms what many knew anecdotally: Pollutants from local industries are making people sick.

Some of the sensors in Nairobi, Kenya were installed at a community radio station. Station manager Thomas Odhiambo said that people had always suspected that lung disease in the community was caused by industry nearby. One of the stories produced using the sensor data at the radio station was by The Star news outlet, which wrote about the impact of the air pollution from a factory called Accurate Steel Mills on an adjacent school. Air pollution levels greater than 10 times what is recommended by the World Health Organization had been recorded

there. The story also detailed how the company was required to raise the height of its chimneys so that the toxic fumes would be more widely dispersed.

This project, and so many others like it around the world, exemplify the growing trend of cross-field collaboration, which we define as a partnership involving at least one journalism organization and one civil society organization — usually an advocacy organization but not always — in which they work together to produce content in the service of an explicit ideal or outcome.



It's similar to collaborative journalism in that it brings multiple organizations together and addresses many of the same resource limitations facing journalists, while providing similar benefits. However, unlike a partnership between newsrooms, cross-field collaborations surface complicated ethical questions about the line between journalism and advocacy, especially for journalists schooled in the tradition of objectivity.

Around the globe, cross-field collaborations are becoming more common and more salient because of the fragmented mediascape and the fact that content producers can no longer rely on the usual channels for their work to be seen. Another reason cross-field collaborations are increasing is that investigative projects are becoming more complicated, due to their cross-border nature, the complexity of the malfeasance, and the variety of skills and expertise necessary to undertake them.

An additional driver of cross-field collaboration is the role that philanthropy has increasingly played in both journalism and media development around the globe. With their high-level views of the information ecosystem, funders have seen a convergence in the missions and practices of advocacy and investigative journalism organizations. Leaders in this space include

the MacArthur Foundation and Civitates, among others. Academic institutions have been on a parallel track, increasingly finding it beneficial to partner in a more formal and sustained way with journalism organizations.

A third reason we are likely to see more cross-field collaboration is also arguably the greatest driver of the trend: impact. When organizations spend valuable resources uncovering corruption, abuse, or neglect, they want to see the problem addressed. While advocates have always had impact as an explicit goal, journalists appear to be more willing than ever to accept (and say out loud) that their work can and should result in real change. This is a significant departure for journalists who were trained to maintain a clear separation between their work and activism.

Below I'll look at each of these trends in detail through the lens of the cross-field collaborations Hanna Siemaszko and I analyzed for our paper, "Cross-field collaboration: How and why journalists and civil society organizations around the world are working together." Overall, we cataloged 155 such collaborations involving 1,010 entities, based in or somehow including 125 countries spread over six continents. Despite this breadth, we know there are many more projects like this that we

didn't look at — suggesting there is much more to learn about cross-field collaboration as an emerging practice.

ANIMAL POLÍTICO IS A DIGITAL investigative news organization in Mexico that covers topics like decreasing access to health care, teenage pregnancy, unemployment, and racial discrimination. It was born on Twitter in 2009 and quickly transitioned to a full-fledged news website in 2010. From its inception, the journalists at Animal Político wanted to build on the relationships with civil society that it had incubated on social media; they wanted to work with academics, advocates, and others not just as sources but as partners.

Part of how they did this was by devoting a page on their website, called El Plumaje, entirely to analysis from various civil society organizations (CSOs). According to Animal Político, El Plumaje was the first and only place in Mexico where non-governmental organizations and other CSOs could get their ideas out to the public in their own words (versus the usual route, which is publishing reports through their own websites and holding press conferences, after which journalists may publish a small item summarizing the findings). The relationships established through El Plumaje have enabled the journalists at Animal Político to work with civil society in other ways, including on projects to better understand and cover Covid-19, to fact-check election claims, and to investigate corruption.

Animal Político also collaborates with civil society organizations on specific projects, like their work with World Justice Project, an NGO that works to promote the rule of law around the globe. For nearly five years, they've partnered with Animal Político to help tell the stories behind the data in their reports detailing the status of the rule of law in Mexico.

WJP's work reaches a core audience of "people who already care about the rule of law," says Leslie Solis, the organization's research director. "If you write a report, there are certain audiences who will read it, like the academic civil society organizations, or people who are interested in a specific thing," she adds. "But if you combine your data with storytelling, either through visual narratives, through journalism, or something else, you can reach wider audiences." In other words, Animal Político puts what can be complex, arcane issues into journalistic formats that enable broader consumption.

Justice can mean many things and goes beyond punishing criminals and rooting out corruption. Animal Político turned WJP's findings about extreme overcharging for electric services in Mexico into a short video, which included interviews with people who experience unfair price hikes, and a text-based story about how some stopped paying their bills in protest. They also used poll data from WJP's report to show that most people who experience electricity shortages don't file formal complaints.

In addition to combining forces to reach a broader audience, another reason cross-field collaboration is taking off is because of the increasingly complicated nature of the topics that investigative journalism projects cover.

Factor Daily is a nonprofit news organization in India that covers how science and tech intersect with society. They became a nonprofit to "break free from the news cycle," as co-founder Pankaj Mishra puts it. This allows them to do projects, rather than just stories, and they dedicate months — sometimes years — to one topic. To report on electronic waste in India, they partnered with Indian NGO Toxics Link, an environmental justice group based in New Delhi. Mishra recounted to us the months they spent in the town of Seelampur, one of the many sites in India with a vast network of waste dumps, working poor, and buyers of the miniscule amounts of precious metals recovered from discarded consumer electronics. Reporting this project meant understanding the economics of the metal industry, the health and environmental repercussions of dismantling the devices, and the broad social forces that drive people to pull their children from school at young ages to do this work, Mishra explained.

Factor Daily's partnership with Toxics Link spanned all facets of the project: The NGO helped the reporters find people on the ground to interview and observe; they answered technical questions about the various aspects of the process by which the electronics are broken down and circulated; and Factor Daily hosted supplemental technical content from Toxics Link on their website. The result was a multimedia story compiled on a landing page that includes text-based articles, interactive videos — one of which focuses on the children who break down the devices — links to academic sources, and advice to readers on how they can reduce electronic waste.

Mishra described the project as a win-win. Toxics Link "is an organization who would lobby the government and policymakers to take up these issues and things like that," he says. "We are not that; we are a journalism organization. But our missions are aligned."

PERHAPS THE MOST URGENT REASON that journalists are more likely to collaborate with civil society is for impact. The most common topics of the cross-field collaborations in our sample were corruption and governance, human rights, and the environment. As one would imagine, the people, businesses, and issues that become the subjects of these projects around these topics are generally not operating as they should; these investigations almost always look into malfeasance, wrongdoing, or neglect. Therefore, the desire and need for a project to lead to change is intense.

The journalists we spoke with recognized the tension between the drive for impact and journalistic neutrality that is common to cross-field collaboration. One way they are negotiating that tension is to be clear with their civil society partners from the beginning of a project about everyone's roles. Journalists are also being careful to let the data speak for itself, and not blur the lines between editorial and advocacy elements. These practices are sometimes written out explicitly and even shared on an organization's or project's website.

Another way journalists negotiate the ethical issues



YASBANT NEGI/THE INDIA TODAY GROUP VIA GETTY IMAGES

raised by working with civil society partners is to speak openly about how journalism is evolving and trusting that the public will see the benefit from these types of partnerships. Miriam Wells, the impact editor at The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, says journalists need to acknowledge that they are not completely neutral when it comes to the basic tenets of organized society, and will work with organizations that strive to defend these values. "I think it's disingenuous to say [journalists] don't have an agenda at all," she said during a June 2021 interview. "Obviously, we have an agenda of justice. We have an agenda of truth. But we don't have a political agenda."

One project that had far-reaching impact is the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ)'s FinCEN Files. More than 400 journalists from 110 newsrooms around the globe and a handful of civil society organizations worked together to uncover the myriad trails of illicit money that flow from the crooked and corrupt through the global banking system. In some cases, the major banks that were moving the funds around had been warned by regulators that they could face criminal penalties for "doing business with mobsters, fraudsters or corrupt regimes," according to the project. ICIJ's website has no fewer than 25 articles cataloging the impact that can be linked to that project, including crackdowns, new laws, and a Nobel nomination for the project. In one example, the files obtained showed how shell companies had allowed high-level officials in Niger to funnel more than \$100 million from the defense budget into private accounts, resulting in major political and social backlash.

Though the scope of the FinCEN Files is much larger than most collaborations — and its impact therefore more salient — ICFJ's dedication to cataloging the impact is also remarkable and unusual; indeed, even though important changes may result from an investigation, they are not always tracked and reported out like they were in this case. We identified a few reasons for this. Impact from projects involving multiple partners across fields is often diffuse. There are multiple audiences accessing content from various platforms, and tracking all of them, even using basic online metrics, can be expensive and time consuming. Also, the data are often qualitative, and therefore difficult to capture programmatically; when a law is changed or a person is jailed it needs to be captured anecdotally. Finally, impact often occurs months or even years after a project ends and can take place hundreds of miles away, making it less likely that those changes will be captured and linked to the project.

In the report we recommend a few ways to ensure that impact is captured. First, teams should build impact tracking into the project agreement from the beginning and get dedicated funding for it if possible. Second, you need to have a person who is in charge of capturing impact, at least part-time. Third, it helps to have one central repository for project impact and require all organizations to provide impact data.

As the global mediascape evolves and financial difficulties continue to force cutbacks and layoffs at news organizations, we think cross-field collaboration will only continue to grow. It's a trend that news organizations should welcome as it will help important information reach mass audiences in the years to come. ■

Ravi Agarwal, director of Toxic Links, checks pollution levels of Yamuna water in New Delhi, India. Factor Daily, a nonprofit news outlet, collaborated with Toxics Link to report on electronic waste

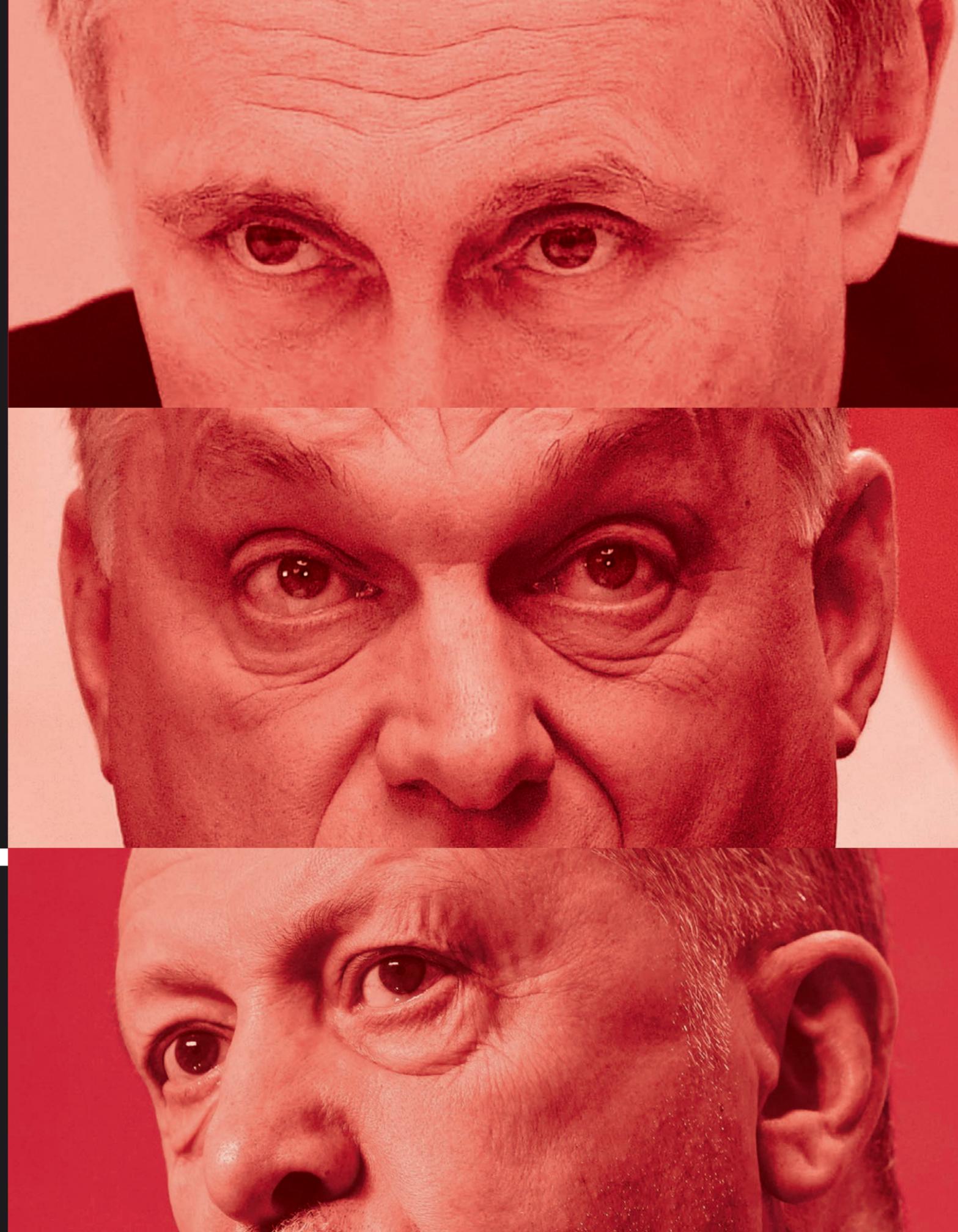
WHEN ORGANIZATIONS SPEND VALUABLE RESOURCES UNCOVERING CORRUPTION, ABUSE, OR NEGLECT, THEY WANT TO SEE THE PROBLEM ADDRESSED

REPORTING
AT RISK

CONFRONTING “PRESS FREEDOM PREDATORS”

Newsrooms are running a gauntlet of abuse around the world. But the threat is greater than against journalism alone — it's against democracy itself

BY ANN MARIE LIPINSKI





I F I ASKED YOU TO NAME A COUNTRY where press freedom has grown stronger in recent years, could you? How about countries where press freedom is increasingly under attack?

If you're still struggling with the first question but can easily answer the second, it's for good reason. Journalism, already weakened by industry economics, is running a gauntlet of abuse around the world. "Press freedom predators," as Reporters Without Borders has named them, now sit at the top of a lengthening list of governments.

But the price is greater than journalism — it's democracy.

"There is no question we are living through a democracy recession," said Michael Abramowitz, president of Freedom House, whose global research on democracy and civil liberties includes measuring the health of journalism. In each of the last 16 years, more countries have experienced democratic declines than improvements, in good measure because of lower scores for freedom of the press.

PREVIOUS SPREAD, TOP TO BOTTOM: DOMENICO STINELLIS/AP PHOTO; ATTILA KISBENDEK/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES; ALEXEI DRUZHININ/AP PHOTO

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: JOHN LOCHER/AP PHOTO; MICHAEL M. SANTIAGO/GETTY IMAGES; MICHAEL MEISTER/ARIZONA REPUBLIC

"It's not the only factor — there's also corruption, lack of transparency, lack of free and fair elections," he added. "But the decline in respect for the free press is clearly a big part of this. We are in a very difficult situation and focusing on protecting journalists and their ability to do their jobs safely and helping to make journalism more economically viable is critical to restoring democracy."

I reached out Abramowitz because I wanted to check my Nieman experience against the long view of Freedom House, which has been monitoring democracy since 1941. Certain countries that once posed modest or manageable threats to journalism in my decade as curator now loom as dark clouds, the dangers personified by a roster of recent Nieman Fellows. Russia, Myanmar, Hungary, Hong Kong, Brazil, India, Venezuela, Poland, the Philippines, Turkey, Mexico, China, Colombia, Nigeria, and Ukraine are among the countries populating my personal map of worry, each place home to journalists whose battles against authoritarianism, violence, and more I've come to know well.

"I think we're on a terribly dire course right now,"

Democracies across the globe have been under threat in the past decade — including in the United States. Candidates who have denied the results of the 2020 presidential election, including Nevada's Jim Marchant, Pennsylvania's Doug Mastriano, and Arizona's Mark Finchem, have gained traction on ballots across the country

concurred Abramowitz, a former editor and White House correspondent for The Washington Post. "All the threats to journalism today are honestly to me so much greater than when I was a journalist."

Those threats are fourfold: violence; cyber campaigns attacking journalists and spreading propaganda such as the one President Rodrigo Duterte undertook against Filipino journalist Maria Ressa; economic intimidation, which Prime Minister Victor Orbán mastered in Hungary; and authoritarians who work to influence and intimidate journalists beyond their own borders through pressure, imprisonment, or worse.

"That's what the murder of Jamal Khashoggi was all about," said Abramowitz.

In this issue of Nieman Reports, journalists from around the world examine the risk to the news ecosystem in their regions and strategies for how to combat a clear anti-press spiral. While the U.S. still upholds laws that protect journalism from some of the worst abuses, it would be naïve to believe the country is safe from decline in press protection.

"In the United States, once considered a model for press freedom and free speech, press freedom violations are increasing at a troubling rate," said Reporters Without Borders in this year's World Press Freedom Index. That index ranked the U.S. 42nd out of 180 countries, an anemic standing for a nation whose origin story is rooted in press rights. The organization attributed the ranking to factors including online abuse of journalists and the unprovoked "harassment, intimidation and assault" reporters endure in the field.

Moreover, some government officials in the U.S. have played a shameful role in delegitimizing the media at home and abroad, spreading anti-press rhetoric that gives succor to despotic regimes around the world. The term "fake news" is a deadly American export, one used to devastating effect by Vladimir Putin since the start of the Ukrainian invasion. And as Emre Kizilkaya writes in this issue, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is using the same language to push through a so-called "disinformation bill" that would represent "an unprecedented attempt to suppress journalism in Turkey."

History moves in waves, Abramowitz said, and he hopes for a democratic wave to serve as a corrective for current conditions, much as the collapse of communism once did. He points to countries including South Korea, the Czech Republic, Taiwan, and the Baltic states as signs of democracy's health, and hopes the war on Ukraine will ultimately offer a corrective. "People are seeing the consequences of unchecked authority in Russia," he said. "I'm hoping it has a salutary effect."

The alternative is clear, as summarized in a sobering Freedom House report on the fragile state of the world's journalism.

"If democratic powers cease to support media independence at home and impose no consequences for its restriction abroad," it warned, "the free press corps could be in danger of virtual extinction." ■

WITH DOM, WE ALL DIED A LITTLE BIT

The murder of a veteran journalist covering the vulnerable in the Amazon has reverberated among reporters in **Brazil**

BY NATALIA VIANA

REPORTING AT RISK

“PLEASE NEVER GO into the Amazon rainforest again.”

The message blinked on my phone right after the news of the disappearance of British journalist Dom Phillips started coming out. Phillips was working on a book in a remote region close to the border between Brazil and Peru. The message came from a friend of mine, a journalist who, like me, had been to the Amazon many times to report. In the spur of the moment, it revealed the anguish we all felt in those days.

Of course, she knew that was a promise impossible to keep. After all, the Amazon is the largest standing forest in the world, one of the key carbon sink systems, and has a vital role to play in the world’s efforts to address the climate emergency.

As the destruction of the forest continues, the Amazon has been and will continue to be the biggest story in my country, Brazil.

And yet, the assassination of Dom Phillips and Indigenous expert Bruno Pereira in June was a clear message from the criminals who profit from plundering the forest’s riches: Stay out of the way.

Dom Phillips was doing quite the opposite. A jour-

nalist who regularly reported for The Guardian and The Washington Post, he had been living in Brazil for 15 years. In a 2018 article, he recounted a roughly 600-mile expedition in the Indigenous area of Javari Valley, a remote region about the size of Austria. Back then, he had followed Bruno Pereira, an expert from the Brazilian Indigenous agency, Funai, to assess the well-being of isolated Indigenous tribes. The main threat to these peoples and the forest, he reported, were “heavily polluting gold mining barges entering rivers to its east, cattle ranchers encroaching on its southern borders, and commercial fishing gangs venturing deep into its centre.”

In June he went back to that same area — together with Pereira — to seek an answer to a crucial question: How do we save the rainforest? The research was to become a book. But it was interrupted by the same groups

threatening the natives whom he had denounced five years earlier.

According to a police investigation, Phillips and Pereira were ambushed and killed by fishermen who practice illegal commercial fishing within the Indigenous reserve. The gang likely has ties to drug traffickers who operate around the border and capitalize on other illegal activities. I will not retell the gruesome details about how they died. Rather, it is crucial to understand why Phillips needed to be where he was, and why the fate of the forest — and of Indigenous peoples — is also the fate of journalists who report on them.

I met Dom Phillips in Rio de Janeiro during the 2016 Olympics. He was an exemplary journalist, kind and generous, and a leader within the foreign correspondent community, which had soared in size ahead

of the international sporting event. He reported on the shattered hopes of the population who expected an economic boost but instead faced corruption and massive displacement.

After that, Dom started to dedicate more and more time to covering the Amazon, as global awareness of the climate crisis grew and while cuts to environmental protection budgets meant the Brazilian government was failing in its vow to protect the forest. At Agência Pública, which I co-founded and where I am one of two executive directors, we did the same. During our 10 years of existence, we have relentlessly covered land conflicts, death threats, assassinations, and the relationship between deforestation and organized crime. It’s the job of any investigative reporting project in Brazil.

Dom was a rare journalist in that he had no fear of

Guarani Indigenous people and human rights activists attend a vigil in São Paulo for Dom Phillips and Bruno Pereira



ANDRÉ PENNER/AP PHOTO

WE MUST FACE THE TRUTH. AFTER THE MEDIA HYPE IS OVER, THE CRUDE KILLING OF DOM PHILLIPS WILL HAVE A CHILLING EFFECT ON JOURNALISM



Dom Phillips (right) talks to Indigenous men in Aldeia Maloca Papiú, Roraima State, Brazil, Nov. 2019

focusing on what mattered for this moment. A couple of months ago I wrote that while the climate crisis is looming, journalists from the North should start paying attention to reporters and sources from the South. That's exactly what Dom did.

He witnessed how the election of President Jair Bolsonaro meant that the Brazilian government was not only failing in its actions to protect the forest from illegal miners, illegal loggers, land grabbers, and other criminal gangs, it started deliberately supporting them. He saw when Bolsonaro's government fired his friend, Bruno Pereira, one of Funai's leading experts on isolated tribes, whom Dom described in his Guardian piece about their 17-day journey in the Javari Valley as "wearing just shorts and flip-flop as he squats in the mud by a fire" while he "cracks open the boiled skull of a monkey with a spoon and eats its brains for breakfast as he discusses policy."

Pereira was fired after helping crack down on illegal miners who invaded another Indigenous land in the Amazon. He was quickly replaced by an evangelical missionary, who opened the path to the last unconquered souls in the world's ongoing Christian crusade. At the same time, Bolsonaro opened the palace in Brasília to illegal miners to put pressure on the lawful protection promised to Indigenous lands in the 1988 constitution. He and his former environment minister, Ricardo Salles, promised to halt the destruction of heavy machinery used by illegal miners, an efficient practice that stops its further use in illegal activities that environmental agencies had used over a decade. Salles is under investigation for using an air force plane to bring illegal miners to his office in Brasília for a friendly talk. In addition, Bolsonaro's allies in Congress are rolling back environmental regulations and pushing for legalizing mining in Indigenous lands.

Such moves have sent a clear "go ahead" sign to criminal gangs who invade Indigenous lands to rob their resources and often threaten, attack, and murder the natives. As a result, much of the Amazon has effectively become lawless. That does not mean that reporters should not go there; on the contrary, this is exactly when reporters should flock there to monitor, denounce, and let the world know what is happening.

Some observers call the situation a "war on the forest" in which reporters are the latest victims on the frontline. I am wary of comparing anything that is not a war to a war, as I have seen the term used politically by states to militarize situations that should have other

solutions — the "war on drugs" being an obvious example.

What is happening in the Amazon is something different. It is a failed state that has allied itself to criminal organizations and, in defending their interests, is actively promoting an assault on the people who live there and the forest that helps regulate the climate in which we all live.

Both Bolsonaro and his vice president Hamilton Mourão tried to shy away from their responsibility by saying Dom Phillips was in "an area that is dangerous, without asking for an escort" and "in an adventure that isn't recommendable for one to do." Of course, journalism is not an adventure, nor is the Amazon a war zone that requires special access for journalists. It is an integral part of Brazil and neighboring countries, where thousands of people live — in the Javari Valley alone there are 6,000 Indigenous peoples and 16 isolated groups. Their security, as well as the security of any journalist who goes to report from there, must be assured by the Brazilian state.

Unfortunately, what we have seen since the news of the disappearance was victim-blaming and denigration of journalists in Brazil. This official response blends perfectly with Bolsonaro's repeated attacks on journalists and journalism.

Under Bolsonaro, Brazil has entered the "red zone" in the rankings of press freedom organization Reporters Without Borders, meaning that the situation for press freedoms in the country is considered "very bad." Bolsonaro's administration has pursued criminal investigations against at least 12 journalists, columnists, and bloggers. Bolsonaro himself is the biggest bully of journalists. On 147 occasions he either discredited or verbally attacked the press in just one year, according to Brazil's National Federation of Journalists, from telling journalists to "shut up" during press conferences to suggesting a female journalist was exchanging sex for information. This created an environment in which attacks on journalists are normalized.

Words are powerful. It was the virulent anti-media discourse of Jair Bolsonaro that allowed local criminals to feel free to murder and hide the body of an internationally renowned journalist like Dom Phillips. And we must face the truth. After the media hype is over, the crude killing of Dom Phillips will have a chilling effect on journalism. How can any editor send reporters to the Amazon without fearing for their lives?

I fear. I fear for journalism and for the forest it has such a role in protecting, but also for those who live in it and those who live to tell their stories and amplify their cries for help. With Dom, we all died a little bit.

However, contrary to the desire of the Brazilian government, whose tepid response betrayed a hope that the story would not generate global headlines, dozens of journalists traveled to the very place where Dom was killed. Agência Pública sent four reporters to cover the story. An emergency grant was set up by the Rainforest Journalism Fund of the Pulitzer Center to help this reporting effort.

We need more reporters in the Amazon, not less. ■

JOÃO LAET/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

WHAT IT'S LIKE WORKING IN THE DEADLIEST COUNTRY IN THE WORLD FOR JOURNALISTS

In Mexico, journalists are trapped between physical threats and political disputes

BY MARCELA TURATI

TRANSLATED FROM SPANISH BY DICK CLUSTER

REPORTING AT RISK

EVERY TIME A REPORTER is killed in Mexico, his or her death explodes in the hearts of the country's other journalists — like an earthquake with expanding effect. It doesn't matter whether they knew the victim or not. Each

murder revives feelings of fear, terror, desperation, rage, and sadness that accumulate over time.

Every time a reporter is killed in Mexico, those of us who have organized to respond to this type of emergency send group messages from our cellphones in which we all ask each other, "Are you OK?"

For the reporters who live in the same city as the murdered colleagues, we ask if they need help paying funeral costs, circulating a political petition on social media, or mounting a protest. And above all, lately, do they need therapy for the trauma?

Wherever the latest killing happens, all of us who have had the experience of burying our colleagues must re-live the memories of fear, sadness, rage, and impotence. The impact is not limited to the families and friends of the victim. It opens a gash in the whole community.

For the last two decades, journalists have been confronted with the fact that you can be killed simply for doing your job, for investigating subjects that someone finds inconvenient. The authorities do not seriously investigate these crimes — 95 percent of the cases since 2011 remain unsolved. Journalists have be-

come more anxious about their safety and their future, struggling with the trauma of losing colleagues.

The opening months of this year have not been easy. In the first five months of 2022, 11 Mexican journalists have been killed, most probably because of their profession: José Luis Gamboa Arenas, Alfonso Margarito Martínez Esquivel, Lourdes Maldonado López, Roberto Toledo, Heber López Vásquez, Juan Carlos Muñiz, Jorge Camero, and Armando Linares López. Luis Enrique Ramírez Ramos was killed by multiple blows to the head in early May, his body wrapped in plastic and left on the side of the road. Just days later, Yesenia Mollinedo Falconi and Sheila Johana García Olivera — both of whom worked for the website El Veraz — were shot to death but it's unclear whether their job was the motive.

The total since 2000 is now more than 150 murdered — at least a dozen of them women, according to Article 19, a human rights group that promotes freedom of expression around the globe. (Several were under official governmental protection.) Twenty-nine have disappeared in roughly the last two decades.

In late 2006, the violence toward journalists increased after newly elected Felipe Calderón declared what he called the "war on drugs," militarizing public security to confront the cartels. It was a strategy that has caused (and is still causing) thousands of deaths and made Mexico a powder keg.

Since then, Mexican journalists have become war correspondents in our own land. The victims have been local reporters — only two murders have occurred in Mexico City — who mainly covered policing, organized crime, and political corruption, or have themselves lived in areas dominated by criminals. They have been killed in the course of their daily routines: outside their houses (sometimes in front of their children), outside of newsrooms, or in places they commonly frequent.

Each case has its own drama.

Alfonso Margarito Martínez Esquivel, a beloved photojournalist in Tijuana, was fatally shot while going through the procedure to access a government program that should have protected him against the threats he was receiving. He was the second reporter murdered in 2022.

One of the attendees at Margarito's vigil was veteran journalist Lourdes Maldonado López, a respected professional and a mentor to many reporters, who had spent almost a decade pursuing an unfair labor practices suit against Jaime Bonilla, the owner of news outlet PSN, who served as governor of Baja California from 2019 to 2021. Maldonado López alleged she was fired without cause or compensation. After she won the case and announced she was about to reveal a web of corruption of her former boss, she was killed, too. She was the third journalist murdered in Mexico this year, shot in the face in her car as she arrived at her house.

At a televised press conference three years before she

was killed, she appealed to President Andrés Manuel López Obrador for protection, telling him she was afraid. She was under state protection, but no one was present when she was assassinated outside her home.

A week later, Roberto Toledo, who worked for the daily *Monitor Michoacán*, an online publication that exposed corruption and was the subject of frequent threats, was shot. When he was killed, the president's spokesperson tweeted that Toledo was not a reporter — another example of the government trying to downplay the violence against journalists. This is a common tactic designed to disrupt investigations and distract from the government's responsibility to solve the crime.

The *Monitor's* editor, Armando Linares López, made a video that day in which, his voice breaking, he stated that the entire staff was under threat for exposing corruption. "We are not armed. We don't carry weapons," he said. "Our only defense is a pen, a pencil, a notepad." On March 15, he was murdered at his home. He was shot at least eight times. *Monitor Michoacán* announced shortly after Linares was killed that it was closing because of security concerns.

On Feb. 10, Heber López, who exposed the corruption of a former local official, was shot five times and killed.

Each assassination, each disappearance, each attempted murder brings with it a torrent of desperate reactions: It forces other journalists to request protection from the government, or temporarily abandon their work, or leave their towns, cities, or states.

For the third year in a row, Mexico holds the disreputable title of being the deadliest country for the press, according to Reporters Without Borders. The country has a trend of assassinations which, if it continues, will likely break the worst of records, according to Article 19.

Part of the problem is the legal system is overwhelmed in general and doesn't have the capacity to prosecute most crimes. But the murder of journalists is also a political issue. Statements from the executive branch fail to match the extent of the tragedy. Since taking office in 2018, López Obrador's administration has seen 33 journalists murdered. He has claimed that the murders are part of a campaign against him, to sabotage his administration.

In his daily morning press conferences, López Obrador calls investigative journalists looking into corruption in his government unpatriotic and tries to discredit the press, which he refers to as the enemy of the government. He routinely — and falsely — says the press lies and has gone after reporters investigating his sons' possible conflicts of interest. After years of ignoring the threats to journalists, those in opposition to López Obrador are now using the spate of murders to criticize the administration, but Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) politicians did nothing when they controlled the federal government, and they continue to do nothing when attacks occur in the states where they still govern. The problem is that such political rivalries obscure the basic issues and leave reporters even more at risk.



"We do not want government condolences! We are not interested in the solidarity of social networks from authorities or popular representatives! Save them! We demand that they assume their responsibilities and stop using us as cannon fodder for their political disputes!" was the message of the journalists' collective *Ni Uno Más* (Not One More), from Michoacán, after the murder of Armando Linares.

While the politicians use violence against journalists to score political points, the attacks against journalists continue. More of them have been displaced from their homes, and more have requested official government protection. The government program to protect journalists has declared itself overwhelmed: In the last three years, the number of people under protection has risen by 60 percent to 1,500 (nearly 500 of whom are journalists). The police who would provide the protection are often overworked and underpaid. The reporters

displaced by threats have no dates for when they can return, nor resolutions of their cases, and they continue to wait far from their places of origin, without the ability to return.

Poor pay and difficult working conditions continue to expose journalists to more risks. The pandemic has only added to the difficulties. Against this backdrop, journalists still have to take on the tasks of organizing self-defense courses and demanding justice for their fallen colleagues. It also falls on us to take care of each other's mental health and create space for therapy while we mourn the dead together.

Journalists continue to protest and have expanded the protests to dozens of cities throughout the country. Where one reporter is killed, collectives of reporters spring up to keep journalism alive.

Over the past few months, we have seen unprecedented protests by members of the profession. Some

have stopped covering speeches in the Chamber of Deputies or in the Senate; in the morning press conference, they tell the president they will ask no questions, instead requesting a moment of silence for their murdered colleagues. Others protest in the forums of the Interior Department about the inadequate protection mechanism, while still others stand up in front of the president to read the names of fallen colleagues, or they protest with placards at press conferences or speeches they need to cover.

With little help on the horizon and no clear message of support for the profession coming from the administration, it appears as though the situation for journalists in Mexico may get worse before it gets better. Yet, journalists in Mexico are not giving up. As we gather to demand justice for our colleague, we take comfort in each other and our chant, "The truth is not killed by killing journalists!" ■

Relatives of journalist Juan Carlos Muniz attend his funeral in Fresnillo, Zacatecas State, Mexico. Muniz, who covered crime for the online news site *Testigo Minero* was killed on March 4, 2022

HEIDI MONTERO/APF VIA GETTY IMAGES

IN MEXICO, A MIX OF VIOLENCE AND ECONOMICS THREATENS LOCAL NEWS ORGANIZATIONS

Newspapers once had the financial strength to resist pressure from politicians looking for favorable coverage. That independence is in danger

BY JAVIER GARZA RAMOS



A woman posts photos of slain journalists during a protest in Mexico City following the murder of journalists Lourdes Maldonado López and Alfonso Margarito Martínez Esquivel. Mexico is having the worst streak of attacks against journalists in history

REPORTING AT RISK

WHEN THE HISTORY of Mexico's transition to democracy is told, there is usually a celebration of the journalists and newspapers that fought to be independent and opened spaces for voices opposing the one-party rule the country had for much of the 20th century.

Newspapers like Reforma and La Jornada are touted, along with the magazine Proceso and its founder Julio Scherer García, and news radio icon José Gutiérrez Vivó. What these outlets and journalists have in common is that they are all based in Mexico City and are referred to as “the national media,” even though their markets seldom went beyond the capital in the pre-Internet days.

This history passes over scores of newspapers and journalists at the local level, in cities across the country that gave voice to opposition parties and dissident politicians in the 1970s and 1980s. They were a crucial force for kicking Mexico's ruling party, the PRI, out of city halls and congressional districts, where the country's transition to democracy began long before the PRI lost its majority in the federal Congress in 1997 and the presidency in 2000.

Those news organizations are now in peril. Criminal forces attack journalists with greater frequency, enjoying an impunity that empowers them to threaten, harass, or kill even more. Economic forces strike at their business models, further weakening them. Political forces seek to control them.

Mexico is having the worst streak of attacks against journalists in history. According to figures compiled by

ARTICLE 19, a non-profit working on press freedom issues, in 2021 a journalist was attacked in Mexico every 14 hours, on average. Three years ago, it was an attack every 16 hours, and three years before that, every 22 hours. At least 11 journalists have been killed in Mexico so far this year, more than the total killed in all of 2021.

There is a long tradition of independent local journalism in Mexico, expressed in the newspapers outside the capital city: El Norte in Monterrey, El Informador in Guadalajara, El Imparcial in Hermosillo, Diario de Yucatán in Mérida, and AM in León, among others, where commercial success led to economic stability. These news organizations had the financial strength to resist pressure from governors and mayors looking for favorable coverage. They were unafraid to expose abuse or corruption by public officials, electoral fraud, or government negligence, while having diverse voices in their opinion pages.

For the past decade, that independence has been in danger. Violence against journalists in Mexico is happening at the local level, in medium-sized cities and small towns, where reporters and editors keep fighting for an independent voice as they struggle to make ends meet.

About 10 years ago, when I was the editor of El Siglo de Torreón, one of the largest and most prestigious newspapers in northern Mexico, I began noticing that, increasingly, the difference between the company making a profit or losing money depended on the number of advertisements purchased by the state and city governments. Pressure for favorable coverage, expressed by the withdrawal of ads, were taking a toll on the bottom line.

At the same time, the newspaper was under fire from

drug cartels fighting a turf war for control of the area's criminal activities. In less than four years, our offices suffered five armed attacks and our journalists received multiple threats, culminating in the kidnapping of five employees in February of 2013.

I remember a conversation I had the year before with Enrique Gómez, the publisher of the AM chain of newspapers in the state of Guanajuato. The newspaper had benefitted greatly from the economic expansion of the Bajío region in central Mexico, but was facing pressures from the state's governor. It was ironic, because AM had been one of the forces behind the center-right PAN displacing the ruling PRI from the state government in the 1990s. It had been one of the very few newspapers actively covering a PAN politician named Vicente Fox, who would go on to become governor and, in 2000, the first non-PRI president in more than 70 years.

But years later, the PAN members in the state government, so grateful for AM's independent journalism when they were in the opposition, were now in power, and were pressuring Gómez to tone down critical coverage of state officials. Depending on their mood, they placed or withdrew ads in the newspaper, which has the largest circulation in the state of Guanajuato, while lavishing ads on smaller newspapers with smaller reach but obedient editors, according to a March 2014 report from the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers.

AM has been diversifying its sources of income, particularly from digital projects, to avoid becoming too dependent on the government for advertising money

— though in recent years, government advertisements have rebounded, Gómez recently told me. Like every other newspaper in the country, AM has been forced to reduce its staff, laying off almost a third of its workforce.

Unfortunately, the newsroom budgets continue to shrink, taking away resources for investigative reporting that promote accountability, and cutting salaries and benefits for journalists even as they are under attack.

One of the most extreme cases is also a recent one. In Zitácuaro, a city of 150,000 people, the news website Monitor Michoacán shut down after two staff members were killed. The website covered crime, drug cartels, and their nexus with local politics. After Roberto Toledo, a camera operator and video editor, was gunned down on Jan. 31, editor Armando Linares López posted a video denouncing the attack. Less than two months later, Linares was killed in his house. The next day, deputy editor Joel Vera announced the website's demise, after two reporters quit. “I'm the only one left,” he said.

Mexico's president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador has said that the state does not kill or silence journalists — but thinking that it's the government that is killing journalists is the wrong diagnosis of the problem. Even if the president is correct in saying that his government does not silence journalists, it is equally true that his government does not go after the ones who do. The level of impunity is staggering — nine out of 10 crimes against journalists are not solved, a rate that has held steady for two decades, regardless of the party in power. López Obrador won the 2018 presidential election with a vow to end violence against journalists and punish those who attack the free press. He has not delivered.

At the same time, his rants against independent journalists are becoming more unhinged. López Obrador benefited from the work of investigative journalists exposing the corruption by public officials, including presidents. The anger voters expressed in 2018 that swept López Obrador into office cannot be explained without independent journalism. Now that López Obrador is in power, he does not like that the journalists who investigated his predecessors are doing the same with him. He has called for exposing the tax returns of journalists or cutting foreign funding of for non-profits working on investigations of his government.

López Obrador delivers these rants in his morning press conferences, called “La Mañanera.” It is a space for airing his grievances about being a victim of obscure, conservative forces, which he says have been advanced by devious business people, unpatriotic citizens, and foreign governments, particularly the United States.

By doing so, Mexico's president delivers a message that he considers journalists as “adversaries.” Local news organizations, once an engine of democracy and accountability, are the most vulnerable.

In Mexico today, a state governor, city mayor, police chief, drug boss, or petty criminal thinking about attacking a journalist for publishing something they do not like can have the certainty that they will get away with it. Why shouldn't they? Even the president thinks that journalists are the enemy. ■

SILENCE IS NOT AN OPTION

How Latin American journalists are using collaborations to get around censorship laws

BY CARLOS EDUARDO HUERTAS

REPORTING AT RISK

VIOLENCE SHOOK EL SALVADOR'S streets yet again in late March. With 87 random murders, the country's gangs sent a message to the administration of President Nayib Bukele in response to what they saw as a betrayal. As investigative journalists revealed, the murders took place after the capture of several gang members who had been traveling in a government vehicle and guaranteed safe passage. Since Bukele's election as president in 2019, gang leaders have been invited to secret meetings which resulted in agreements to lower the incidents of crime in the Central American nation.

The story was first published in the digital journal *El Faro* (The Beacon), one of the oldest in El Salvador and in Latin America. One of its reporters, Carlos Martínez, filed the account from outside the country — not only because that was where he met with his sources, but also because, by including voices of gang members, he risked 15 years' imprisonment under emergency laws imposed by the government in early April.

Like Martínez, thousands of journalists in several countries of Latin America have discovered that, sometimes overnight, doing their work well has become illegal. This has happened in Nicaragua under the regime of Daniel Ortega and his wife Rosario Murillo, and previously in Venezuela with Nicolás Maduro. Another example is Ecuador, which is slowly emerging from limitations imposed during the 10-year administration of Rafael Correa, who characterized the press as an enemy and discredited its investigative work. At the

time, Ecuador was considered one of the most repressive governments on the continent because of the disproportionate sanctions imposed by Supercom, the country's media regulator, and its effectiveness in generating fear and censorship.

"This new law is the culmination of a whole process to the detriment of democracy," said Óscar Martínez, editor in chief of *El Faro*, in a recent Twitter Space. The new measures give the government more latitude to make use of pretrial detentions and counterterrorism laws as well as drastically curtail freedom of expression. In the same conversation, César Batiz, director of *El Pitazo* in Venezuela, said that the goal of power is to create "information deserts," instead of creating informed citizens as journalism seeks to do.

In Nicaragua, the implementation of three distinct laws at the end of 2020 has resulted in fear among sources, the squeezing of mass media financing, and an atmosphere of intimidation and persecution. One of these laws penalizes those who leak. The second penalizes those who disseminate information the government considers false. The third punishes people who receive money from foreign sources without reporting it and categorizes those who receive any kind of financial support from abroad as foreign agents.

For example, as part of a state investigation into the supposed crime of money laundering involving the Ortegas' main political opponent, 60 journalists were interrogated by the prosecutor's office and were forced to explain their professional relationship with the Violeta Barrios de Chamorro Foundation, an organization recognized for promoting freedom of expression since 1998. Some of these journalists, who received modest sums for consulting with the organization, were investigated for money laundering.

In Venezuela, the Law Against Hatred was passed in November 2017 and has been used by the government to quash dissent. The measure "mandates punishment and prison terms of up to 20 years for anyone who instigates hate or violence on the radio, television, in print or via social media," according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. Numerous journalists have been harassed under this law. One high-profile case is Roberto Deniz, an editor with investigative website *Armando.Info* who was accused of "inciting hatred." His parents' home was also searched by police in October.

In Cuba, although the constitution states that freedom of thought, conscience, and expression are guaranteed, that's never really been the case. Recent decrees have also contradicted this principle. In August of 2021, the government instituted its own "fake news" measures, essentially prohibiting the dissemination of what officials deem to be false or harmful information online. Under the new regulations, the government can also force tech companies to shut down the accounts of people accused of spreading



"misinformation" on social media or other platforms. José Jasán Nieves, general editor of the Cuban website *El Toque*, said that all journalism not controlled by the state is considered hostile and illegal.

Faced with the lack of guarantees protecting journalistic work, the only way reporters have been able to remain at liberty and continue to disseminate information is by leaving their countries and taking their families with them. "We have returned to a journalism of the catacombs," said the Nicaraguan journalist Octavio Enríquez during a panel about how to carry out reporting in contexts ever more difficult for democracy. The phrase refers to the late the 1970s, during the era of the Somoza dictatorship, when reporters worked from the courtyards of churches to avoid censorship. Enríquez now reports from Costa Rica.

In this challenging landscape, journalistic alliances have emerged as a way to elude this "new legality" that persecutes free and independent reporting. "It makes no sense to compete when you are facing an adversary so strong that it has no scruples about using all the tools to censor your voice," Nieves says.

This was part of our mission in forming CONNECTAS, a nonprofit organization that "promotes the production, exchange, training, and dissemination of information on key issues for the development of the Americas." In a series of investigations under the title "Nicaragua No Calla" (Nicaragua Will Not Be Silent), we brought together 20 journalists from the United States, Mexico, Costa Rica, Colombia, Argentina, and of course Nicaragua to expose the institutional deterioration of the nation and its democracy. The result was several stories detailing Ortega's rise to power, how his shadow

adviser — Néstor Moncada Lau — controls the local security agencies, and how police officers can get away with massacring a family.

"A great help and support for continuing to do journalism in these conditions has been ceasing to see each other within the media as competitors," says Jessica Ávalos, editor in chief of *Factum Magazine* in El Salvador. "Now there are alliances of traditional and independent media, which was not the case before."

In 10 years, CONNECTAS has created a large regional editorship that brings together more than 130 journalists in 19 countries. This has allowed us in evermore-closed societies to continue to work and amplify the impact of our reporting because it is often republished in multiple media outlets across the region.

"Alliances help to coordinate broader and deeper investigations," says Nelson Bocaranda, general manager and editor in chief of the Venezuelan website *Runrun.es*. "They are our way around geographic and digital barriers that persecution often imposes. . . . I think it was only through uniting that we succeeded in breaking through censorship." *Runrun.es* has joined with *El Pitazo* and *Tal Cual* of the *Alianza Rebelde Investiga*, under the umbrella of CONNECTAS, for several high-impact investigations that reach across borders like their story *Chavismo Inc.*, a detailed look into how millions of petrodollars were siphoned out of Venezuela to line the pockets of a small cohort of individuals around the globe.

The word "resist" has grown ever more common in the vocabulary of colleagues in Latin American countries. But so has the word "solidarity," which encourages cooperation rising out of the conviction that silence is not an option. Even when imposed by law. ■

Nicaraguan police officers block journalists working outside the house of opposition leader Cristiana Chamorro after prosecutors sought her arrest for money laundering in Managua, Nicaragua, June 2021

CARLOS HERRERA/REUTERS



REPORTING
AT RISK

**“WE SHOULD SIDE WITH
DEMOCRACY”**

**WHY THE WAR
IN UKRAINE IS
EXISTENTIAL FOR
BALTIC JOURNALISTS**

BY KAROLIS VYŠNIAUSKAS



A Lithuanian demonstrator runs in front of a Soviet Red Army tank during the assault on the Lithuanian Radio and Television station on Jan. 13, 1991 in Vilnius. That memory combined with Putin's war has fueled concern about what could happen if Russia's territorial ambitions expand

W

HEN REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS released its latest World Press Freedom Index in May, the findings were grim: In more than 130 countries, the situation for journalists was classified as being “problematic” or worse, and the number of countries classified as “very bad” for press freedom hit a record high — 28 out of 180.

But there was one glimpse of hope: For the first time since the index was launched, two Baltic countries made it to the top 10. Lithuania ranked 9th and Estonia was 4th, right after Norway, Denmark, and Sweden. Latvia, the third of the “Baltic sisters,” was 22nd — still higher than the U.K., France, and the U.S.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: For many Baltic journalists, the war in Ukraine means rethinking the limits of “bothsidesism,” including DELFI Latvia, where Ingus Bērziņš is editor

PREVIOUS SPREAD: KARLIS DAMBRĀNS/DELFI
ABOVE: ANDRĒ DURAND/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

For many Baltic journalists, who serve more than six million people in all three countries combined, the results came as a surprise. After two years of Covid-19, they were overworked and less secure in their jobs. As in many countries, the media advertising market hasn’t come back to its level before the financial crisis of 2008 and the rise of social media.

The press freedom report reminded Baltic journalists how far they’ve come since the days of the Cold War when Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia were occupied by the Soviet Union, and the press was controlled by Communist Party officials. The biggest Soviet newspaper, Pravda (“Truth”), was cheap, and the jobs there could last a lifetime — but it didn’t allow criticism of the party line.

Since Feb. 24, when Russian troops started a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, many have feared that the progress the Baltic states have made could be upended. So Baltic journalists are covering the war in Ukraine as if it’s their own — because in many ways it is.

For Baltic journalists, the war in Ukraine is not just another story to cover with “the view from nowhere.” It’s something very personal that affects journalists both as citizens and professionals.

“In our case, the question is, will we be alive or not,” says Indrė Makaraitytė, head of Lithuania’s public broadcaster LRT’s investigative division, describing the mood in the newsroom. “It seems that no other topic matters. The war is not in our territory, but emotionally it is our war. Here in the Baltics, and in Poland as well, we see this war for the safety concern that it is. If Ukraine survives, we will survive.”

AFTER THE COLLAPSE of the Soviet Union, journalists in the newly re-established Baltic republics, which joined the European Union as well as NATO in 2004, had to create an independent press from scratch. Today in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, the biggest players in the industry operate on a market basis, with transparent funding and freedom from politicians or oligarchs. All three countries established strong public broadcasters, funded by taxpayers, similar to the BBC in the U.K. or Deutsche Welle in Germany.

Just like their counterparts in the U.S., Baltic journalists face a lack of trust in media, the erosion of the regional press, and people’s unwillingness to pay for the news. But there is no risk of going to jail for your work, like in neighboring Belarus. Critical reporting on the government appears every day through print, digital, TV, and radio platforms.

Still, Baltic journalists have reason to worry. In December, during negotiations with the U.S., Russia announced a desire to revert the world’s security architecture to 1997 when the Baltic states were not part of the E.U. or NATO. In the worldview of Vladimir Putin, the Baltic states — all three of which share borders with Russia and have significant Russian-speaking populations like Ukraine — should have never been independent. Tensions flared in late June when Lithuania said it would enforce E.U. sanctions on goods being transported to Kaliningrad, a tiny piece of Russia that’s nestled between the Baltic country and Poland. Russian officials threatened serious repercussions for the entire Lithuanian population, setting the entire region even further on edge.

The memory of Soviet soldiers occupying the offices of LRT, on Jan. 13, 1991 — just months after the country declared independence — remains fresh for many journalists. Fourteen people died that night in Vilnius. That memory combined with Putin’s war has fueled concern about what could happen if Russia’s territorial ambitions expand.

Lithuania, the biggest of the Baltic states, has a population of 2.8 million. There are five major digital news websites, four competing TV stations, two news-fo-

“It is not a both-sides issue. Russian soldiers are raping women in Ukraine. There is a war, and Russia is an aggressor”

INGA SPRINĢE
FOUNDER, RE:BALTICA

cused radio stations, more than 100 online journalism initiatives ranging from podcasts to investigations, and at least 10 print newspapers and magazines that still matter.

The situation is similar but on a smaller scale in Latvia and Estonia. Estonia, the wealthiest of three Baltic states, is leading in turning their digital readers into subscribers: In 2020, almost one out of 10 people in a country of 1.3 million were paying for online journalism, according to the Estonian Association of Media Enterprises. Meanwhile, Latvian journalists are known for their investigative work and having a strong media studies program at Riga’s Stockholm School of Economics.

Competition in the Baltic media is generally fierce. But a new trend has emerged: solidarity. Almost all major news channels across all three countries have changed their logos to blue and yellow — the colors of the Ukrainian flag. After more than 100 days of the war, Ukraine’s colors remained. 15min.lt, one of the leading portals in Lithuania, went as far as putting “Slava Ukraini!” (“Glory to Ukraine!”) in Ukrainian letters next to their logo.

Some influential websites also turned off their comment sections to stop Russian disinformation campaigns. For many years, especially before the rise of Facebook, comment sections were among the first spaces for people to express themselves online and connect with other readers. Though the quality of comment section discussions had begun deteriorating in the last few years, the conversation was completely hijacked once Russia invaded Ukraine.

“First we tried to turn off the comments only for the stories about Ukraine,” says Inga Bērziņš, editor of Latvia’s DELFI, the most popular news website in the country. (Each Baltic nation has their own version of DELFI, and each of them is a leader in terms of traffic.) “Then we understood that these supposedly Kremlin trolls are working everywhere. You can publish a recipe on how to make pancakes, and you will find comments saying that Latvia is a failed state and Putin is a hero. So, we decided to close them entirely.”

Bērziņš also says that Latvian DELFI has been the target of daily bot attacks, but its firewall keeps the website going. “Last week there were at least seven attacks,” he said in an email in early June. All three versions of DELFI, just like the websites of Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian public broadcasters and more than 2,000 news websites worldwide, are blocked in Russia for their coverage on the war in Ukraine.

Postimees, the main competitor of DELFI in Estonia, has emerged as one of the leaders in covering the war in Ukraine among privately owned media companies. Its journalists have reported on Ukrainians hiding in bomb shelters in Luhansk, launched a live blog of the war, and started a newsletter focused on Ukraine. The newsroom also launched a Ukrainian-language edition, alongside the Estonian, Russian, and English versions it was already running, to help inform the 41,000 Ukrainian refugees in Estonia, who now comprise more than three percent of the population. On Feb. 15, Postimees’ foreign

news section received 224,000 clicks. On Feb. 25, the day after the invasion began, the number was 1.2 million.

Baltic reporters working in Ukraine have filed from the front lines, including a photo series from war-torn Chernihiv. And, like in many newsrooms, the coverage has involved everyone from foreign correspondents to sports reporters. But, unlike many other newsrooms, Baltic news organizations have taken an unabashed pro-Ukrainian stance.

There is no shortage of information about what Vladimir Putin and his Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov are saying. But Latvian, Lithuanian, and Estonian journalists don’t pretend they don’t have a stake in the story.

“If you wrote a column in Latvian media supporting Russia, that would be journalistic suicide,” says Inga Sprinģe, co-founder of the Baltic center for investigative journalism, Re:Baltica. She doesn’t think that’s unfair or biased: “It is not a both-sides issue. Russian soldiers are raping women in Ukraine. There is a war, and Russia is an aggressor.”

“We in the Baltics have already experienced it,” continues Sprinģe, who is Latvian. “We have lived under Russia’s occupation for five decades. Our family mem-

bers were deported to Siberia. We know what could happen. And we are afraid that it will happen again.”

Instead, columnists are writing critical analyses of Germany’s and France’s foreign policy towards Russia or calling out their own politicians’ pro-Kremlin behavior.

One of the leading Latvian voices analyzing the war in Ukraine is IR, a weekly magazine led by editor Nellija Ločmele. One of IR’s March cover illustrations, blending Putin’s face with the illustration of a skull, was printed as a massive banner and hung at the Museum of Medicine in Riga, facing the Russian embassy. The embassy sent an official note to remove it, which the museum refused.

Tarmu Tammerk, the Tallinn-based Estonian Public Broadcasting Company’s ombudsman, says that while many news organizations across the Baltics provide Russia’s point of view, it is always put into context. “When the Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson is saying that in Bucha, there was no Russian attack, it’s just a Ukrainian provocation, they are staging it with actors, and she goes on and on, we do not go on with this lie,” he says. “We quote her, but then we give facts. Bucha had been verified by the teams present there, with

satellite images. ... We don’t let lies be repeated over and over again. It is not morally justifiable.”

The news environment is more complex — and potentially more divisive — for those who speak both Baltic and Russian languages. “We have journalists from multi-language families,” says Monika Garbačiauskaitė-Budrienė, director general of LRT in Lithuania. “Some of their family members believe the Russian propaganda machine. Meanwhile, journalists follow the news from verified sources and see what is actually happening. It’s hard to cope with that psychologically.”

MANY RUSSIAN JOURNALISTS have resettled in the Baltic states — namely Latvia, which shares a 133-mile border with Russia and has the largest Russian-speaking population — almost 400,000 people — of the three countries. The latest example is Novaya Gazeta, an iconic Russian newspaper that has become a symbol of the free press in the region. It was the last independent media channel to suspend publishing operations in Russia. After a short break, it launched a separate online and print edition from Riga, under the name Novaya Gazeta Europe. Editor Kirill Martynov, who is



Ukrainian citizens gather in the House of Congress in Latvia after fleeing the war in their country. The influx of refugees has prompted many Baltic news organizations to launch Ukrainian language editions

“It must be shown that such a war actually takes away the future from our children and makes us all miserable and poorer”

KIRILL MARTYNOV
EDITOR, NOVAYA GAZETA
EUROPE

Russian, told Latvian Radio that their goal is to provide honest reporting about the war: “It must be shown that such a war actually takes away the future from our children and makes us all miserable and poorer.”

Meduza, the news site that has become an important source for many Westerners seeking Russian-related news, has been operating from Riga since 2014 as a Russian journalists’ newsroom in exile. When the invasion started, Meduza was blocked in Russia for correctly calling the attack a “war.” And once sanctions on Russia’s banking system were imposed, the newsroom lost payments from its 33,000 monthly supporters in Russia. In response, the newsroom started a crowdfunding campaign, “Save Meduza,” aimed at Western audiences. In June, it had more than 12,000 backers. “We have around half of what we need on a regular basis every month,” says Ivan Kolpakov, editor in chief.

Even before the war, Meduza journalists were preparing for the day their website would be shut down in Russia. They launched a campaign explaining how to use a virtual private network to access the website and grew their Telegram social network audience to one million. The website is blocked in Russia, but audiences can still download the app and subscribe to an email newsletter. “At the beginning of the war, we had 300,000 downloads of the app. By now, we have more than one million downloads,” says Kolpakov. “And people use the app more often than the website. Each user returns around 25 times a month on average.” As a result, Meduza managed to keep the majority of its audience.

Just like other Russian media newsrooms in exile, Meduza evacuated all its staff from Russia. It is left with what Kolpakov calls “guerrilla reporters” — a network of freelance journalists who work anonymously and with great care to “bring a lot of reporting from the ground” because they can be criminally prosecuted.

Kolpakov, who is Russian, says that the newsroom’s main goal is to re-establish the connection between people in Ukraine and Russia. He is happy that the readership in Ukraine is growing: “The conversation between Ukrainians and Russians was interrupted in 2014 with the invasion of Crimea, but it was completely destroyed on the 24th of February. We have to be a bridge between two societies.”

In an effort to build this bridge, Meduza publishes human-focused stories of both Ukrainians and Russians opposing the war. For example, they ran a story about a Ukrainian painter, whose works were saved from a museum bombed by Russian forces and a story on the first Russian citizen to be charged for “discrediting” the army.

WHILE THE BALTIC COUNTRIES embraced independent Russian journalists, they denounced Russia’s state-controlled media which, in the words of Meduza’s English-language editor Kevin Rothrock, is “an extension of the Russian military, not ‘the news.’” As of June 9, Latvia’s National Council for Electronic Media (NEPLP) blocked more than 80 Russian TV channels. The ban was imposed after Latvia’s parlia-



ment passed a new law that allows restricting foreign programs that “threaten the country’s sovereignty” in late May.

For Bērziņš, editor of Latvia’s DELFI, the war in Ukraine means rethinking the limits of press freedom to avoid false bothsidesism. “We are in a war of values,” he says. “I think we should side with democracy.”

In Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, officials shut down Russian media, arguing that the channels threaten national security and promote ethnic-based hatred towards Ukrainians. In Latvia and Estonia, about a quarter of the population are Russian speakers, and attitudes towards the war among those populations are more mixed — presenting a challenge to journalists trying to cover this population in ways that are nuanced and representative. After the main Russian language TV channels and websites were blocked in Estonia, some of their viewers turned to public broadcaster ERR.

“Some of the people just reject what they see,” says

Estonian Public Broadcasting’s Tammerk, commenting on letters and calls received by the public broadcaster. “They say, ‘Stop with Western propaganda. Why are you lying about Moscow?’ ‘You just wait until Putin gets here.’” According to Tammerk, there have also been “nasty and aggressive” verbal threats to Russian-speaking public media journalists.

Since Feb. 24, Baltic journalists have supported Ukrainian resistance in a number of ways. Olga Dragileva, a Latvian DELFI journalist, who grew up as a Russian speaker in Riga, initiated an open letter denouncing Russia’s war, which was signed by 114 influential Russian speakers in Latvia, from artists to athletes to epidemiologists. Among them were 26 journalists. The letter was followed by a demonstration of Russian voices against the war, during which she spoke.

“There is a feeling from part of the Latvian society that as a Russian speaker, I am less afraid of war, which

is not true,” she says. “I am afraid of Russian soldiers just the same, even though we share the same language. I am ashamed that our mother tongue is used to give orders to kill and rape. I’ll have to live with it for the rest of my life.”

In Lithuania, the Lithuanian Journalists Car Club collected 33 SUVs and pickup trucks for the Ukrainian army. At least eight media organizations, partially supported by their readers on Patreon, left the platform after the company suspended fundraising for a Kyiv-based non-profit looking for donations to buy body armor and medical kits for the Ukrainian army. These media companies moved to local crowdfunding platform Contributee. One such organization was Laisvės TV, whose founder, Andrius Tapinas, raised 305,000 euros from more than 13,000 followers to help Ukraine. In May, Tapinas and Laisvės TV started the biggest crowdfunding campaign in country’s history: They raised more than 5 million euros to buy a Bayraktar drone for Ukraine’s army. The money was raised in less than four days. When asked by the BBC if he blurred the lines as a journalist, Tapinas said that he doesn’t think so. “Social activity [now] is more important. I don’t want to be ‘objective’ about Russian occupants killing and raping Ukrainians. ... We need to combat [them] regardless our profession.”

When Lithuanian reporters for DELFI first went to Ukraine, they left helmets and vests for Ukrainians, recalls Rasa Lukaitytė-Vnarauskienė, editor in chief of Lithuanian DELFI. But they weren’t immediately able to buy more safety equipment for themselves because the country’s supply had all been sent to Ukraine.

Margus Parts, a foreign news reporter at Postimees, grew up in an independent Estonia but says that the fear of their Eastern neighbor — Estonia shares a 183-mile border with Russia — has been passed to his generation. The wake-up call came in 2007 when Estonia’s government removed the Soviet-era Bronze Soldier statue from the center of Tallinn. The statue was supposed to portray the “liberation” of Estonia by Russians, but from an Estonian perspective, their country was occupied and forcibly incorporated into the Soviet Union.

The decision caused riots. Stores were looted, kiosks were set on fire, and one person, a Russian citizen who was a permanent resident of Estonia, died. The chaos lasted a few days and spread to other cities. Many in Estonia believe that the riots were fueled by the Kremlin to increase ethnic divisions in the country. Estonia’s embassy was vandalized in Moscow. That same year, Russia mounted the biggest cyberattack against Estonia in the country’s history, targeting its parliament, banks, and media websites.

Parts, who works up to 12-hour shifts writing for the website and the newspaper, eventually got exhausted and asked to start working from home. But he also feels his work has never been more important: “I’ve been a journalist for six years. For the first time, I felt that the readers are behind us on such a level. There is definitely an increased sense of companionship and purpose among journalists. It’s a truly altruistic work.” ■

An anti-Putin banner was displayed at the Museum of Medicine in front of the Russian embassy in Riga, Latvia. The image first appeared on the cover of IR, a Latvian magazine that has taken the lead in reporting on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine

GINTIS IVUSKANS/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

PIERCING PUTIN'S TRUTH BLOCKADE

A handful of courageous Russian journalists are fighting on the frontline of an information war. It is a battle that affects us all

BY SHARON MOSHAVI AND ROMAN ANIN

REPORTING AT RISK

THIS WAR, like any war, has no shortage of heroes: not only the Ukrainian recruits fighting valiantly against a far larger Russian military, but also journalists, Ukrainian and foreign, covering the war at great personal risk. These correspondents deserve our gratitude and support, but there is another cadre of reporters embarking on a different sort of mission and facing different dangers: Russia's independent media. These journalists desperately need our support, too.

President Vladimir Putin has squashed Russia's last remaining independent news outlets, threatening journalists as well as ordinary citizens with imprisonment should they stray from the Kremlin line. (A new law passed at the beginning of the conflict carries punishments of up to 15 years in prison for anyone who spreads what the government deems "false information" about the invasion.) At least 150 Russian journalists have responded by fleeing to neighboring countries like Armenia, Georgia, and Latvia and forming a kind of media-in-exile. Working their sources by phone and other platforms, they continue to report on the war in Ukraine as well as the increasingly authoritarian darkness in Russia.

Consider the case of Roman's news outlet, IStories (or

"Important Stories"). Under increasing pressure from the Kremlin, he and his staff crammed their laptops, their pets, and their lives into vehicles and made the long journey to Latvia and other countries. They waited at the borders for hours, afraid they might be arrested. Once out of Russia, they discovered their credit cards didn't work. No one wanted to rent apartments to them because of their nationality. These journalists occupy a kind of netherworld, not welcome in Russia yet eyed warily abroad because of where they come from. They have become stateless and homeless yet remain determined to fight the information war.

IStories' audience is young, tech-savvy — and curious. Unlike their parents, they don't consume a steady diet of state media's twisted facts and outright lies. As the impact of sanctions deepens, they will have many questions. Why are Putin's cronies growing richer while we are getting poorer? What exactly is the British government doing, or not doing, to crack down on Russian oligarchs living in London?

This young audience will look to Russian independent media for answers. They have already begun. For instance, IStories' coverage of the atrocities and possible war crimes committed by Russian troops in the Ukrainian town of Bucha, were read widely and deeply. IStories is delivering its coverage to more newsletter subscribers than ever before — growth that is taking place not among expatriates but inside Russian borders — and has seen more than 50 percent growth on Telegram. They reach others on Instagram and YouTube, where IStories has 184,000 subscribers and recently published a 15-minute video compilation showing exactly what Putin wants no one to see: the death and destruction the war has brought to both Ukraine and his own soldiers. ("The tanks are pushing us forward as meat shields," says one Russian fighter.) Getting information out of Russia proves harder, as many people fear the consequences of speaking to a journalist, but IStories continues to publish stories questioning Putin's decision to go to war and documenting the atrocities the Russian military is inflicting on Ukraine.

Audiences are seeking out coverage from IStories and other independent sources. Meduza, an independent news outlet founded by a Russian journalist based in Latvia, has millions of readers and has roughly tripled the number of followers on its Telegram channel since the invasion, a spokeswoman said. While their site is blocked in Russia, visitors can still access it using VPNs, and their Instagram channel and newsletters remain accessible. They have lost sources inside the country in recent weeks, but others risk talking anonymously to Meduza's reporters from afar. Funding is yet another challenge: Meduza quickly shifted from crowdsourcing funds from their Russian readers who are no longer able to use credit cards due to sanctions to international supporters. They also are offering more English-language content than ever.

Other media-in-exile are reaching new audiences as well — such as Proekt Media, Holod, MediaZona, ROMB

and the newly rebranded Novaya Gazeta Europe. They are working hard to ensure that Russian youth aren't poisoned like their parents by Kremlin propaganda. But like the Ukrainian military, they are outgunned and out-funded. Just as much of the world is stepping up to supply Ukraine with the resources it needs to win this war, we also need to supply these journalists with what they need. Not weapons, of course, but plenty else.

Russian journalists in exile need money. The cost of living abroad is higher than it is in Russia, and news outlets can no longer rely on readers inside the country to support their journalism financially. Funders can help by backing reporting fellowships and grants for newsrooms-in-exile. U.S. and European newsrooms can hire Russian journalists and outlets to collaborate on reporting, something that would deepen their own coverage. And people who want to help can subscribe or donate to independent news outlets. (The same is true for Ukrainian media as well.)

These reporters also need access to technology both to cover the news and to disseminate it to get past Putin's firewalls. Censorship circumvention platform Psiphon is bringing reporting from independent news outlets to Russians who use Psiphon to access the internet — even if the users are only trying to get to a banned site such as Facebook. Psiphon needs funding to keep this important service going. Apple should make iCloud Private Relay, which hides users' IP addresses from the sites they are visiting, available in the country again. And Facebook, now banned in Russia, should be more re-

sponsive to independent news outlets in Ukraine struggling to reach audiences and generate revenue because the platform is flagging their war coverage for violating community standards in a way that's stifling important information from reaching larger audiences.

It would be wrong to think of this as only, or even primarily, a problem of technology. The best platforms and circumvention techniques in the world are useless without quality, independent journalism. And that means helping with low-tech solutions such as visas to safe havens in the U.S. and Europe where journalists can work without fear of harassment, or worse. This press-in-exile is safer but not safe. Putin has shown a willingness to target and kill his perceived enemies in London and other foreign capitals.

Most of all, perhaps, Russia's journalists-in-exile need faith. They need the world to believe that they can win the information war and that, even if the truth is bloodied, it does not suffer a fatal blow. This is a long battle, and we've got to win it.

The stakes are high. Not just for Russia and Ukraine but the rest of the world, too. This is a test case. Can an authoritarian regime snuff out independent media in the 21st century? Or can a ragtag crew of underdog journalists repel this onslaught of disinformation and ensure that truth finds a home?

You can bet that leaders from Beijing to Brasilia to Budapest, and elsewhere, are watching this battle closely. Everyone else, too, needs to be watching — and helping as if the future depends on it. ■



ARTURAS MOROZOVAS/THE WASHINGTON POST VIA GETTY IMAGES

Sergey Smirnov, editor in chief of Mediazona, fled to Vilnius, Lithuania due to the possible threat of persecution. At least 150 Russian journalists have fled to countries like Latvia, Armenia, and Georgia

I WITNESSED ORBÁN CRACK DOWN ON HUNGARY'S FREE PRESS. HERE'S MY ADVICE

When you come under attack as a journalist, don't make yourself the center of the story

BY ANDRÁS PETHŐ

REPORTING
AT RISK

THIS IS A STRANGE TIME to be a Hungarian journalist.

Working in a small Central European country, we were not used to getting international attention. In recent years, however, we have often been approached by journalists from developed democracies, including some working for prestigious American outlets, who asked for our advice. They wanted to know if we had any tips on how to handle the rising autocratic and anti-media tendencies in their own countries.

They came to us after learning how Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, whom rightwing firebrand Steve Bannon once called “Trump before Trump,” has cracked down on the free press alongside other democratic institutions.

In a recent speech at a CPAC conference in Budapest, Orbán openly spoke about how reshaping the media has been one of the keys to his power. “Have your own media,” he recommended to the audience full of American conservatives, adding that programs like

Tucker Carlson’s Fox show “should be broadcasted day and night.”

I have felt Orbán’s crackdown on my own skin. Eight years ago, Origo, the popular news website I worked for at the time, came under intense political pressure because of exposés I wrote about a powerful government figure. My editor and I were told by representatives of the outlet’s owners, a telecommunications company that had close ties with the government, to slow down the reporting, and they even asked for the removal of certain stories from the site.

Not wanting to work under censorship, I left and set up Direkt36, an investigative reporting non-profit, with two former colleagues.

Thanks to our dedicated membership community



PETR DAVID JOSEK/AP PHOTO

and the generosity of some international foundations, Direkt36 is now one of the very few outlets in Hungary that is not under the government’s influence and is also independent from other political or business interests. At the same time, we also became targets of regular attacks from the government and its allies. For example, pro-government propaganda outlets often claim, falsely, that we are foreign agents. Two of our reporters were even surveilled with the spyware known as Pegasus, a cyberweapon used by the Hungarian government.

Despite the first-hand experience, I don’t think I could give particularly useful tips to the journalists who reached out to me. I don’t know any magic weapons against autocratic crackdowns. What I can do is share

common mistakes that we all can avoid so as not to make our own situation worse.

One of them is that when you come under attack from political forces as a journalist, it is tempting to make yourself the center of the story. I would recommend against doing that. While it is important to record the facts and explain to the public that media capture is a well-known strategy in dismantling democratic institutions, focusing too much on your role, however noble it is, will create a narrative that you personally fight against certain political forces. Nothing would make autocrats happier, as it would reinforce their argument that journalists are out to get them.

The other piece of advice concerns the attacks not against you, but against people and organizations representing democratic values that we had taken for granted (such as the rights of minorities, for example). When you see that, it may feel urgent to use the platforms you have and speak up against it in forceful ways. Again, I would recommend against doing that.

Being vocal will almost certainly make you more visible in the field (and will generate some social media followers), but what you gain in raising your profile can cost you in terms of credibility as a reporter. If you act like an advocate, you should not be surprised if you become viewed as such. Sure, you may become popular in certain corners, but others will be skeptical of your work, and this will limit your audience.

I’m not saying that nobody should speak up. On the contrary, I hope that lots of people — human rights defenders, advocacy groups, or simply just average social media users — will do it. But if you are in the news business, your greatest possible contribution to saving democracies is doing your job and doing it well. The need for profound and thorough news reporting is greater than it has been for a very long time. We are living in historic times as tectonic shifts are taking place in almost every sphere of society, and it is our utmost duty to record these events as accurately and deeply as possible.

There is another reason for focusing all our journalistic energies on reporting. Our information ecosystem is noisy, messy, and polluted with propaganda and misinformation. It is much harder to make an impact on the public discourse now than it was in the seemingly very distant past when news outlets and not technology companies controlled the flow of information. But ambitious reporting initiatives can have a powerful impact even in this environment. I saw this firsthand as a proud participant in some of recent years’ biggest international journalism collaborations such as the Panama Papers and the Pegasus Project. These stories dominated the global public discourse for weeks, prompted positive changes in several countries, and, even if just briefly, put autocratic governments such as Hungary’s on the defensive.

Those experiences taught me that there is still no better way to cut through the noise than by telling a great story. We should focus on doing that as if our survival depended on it. Because in some places it already does. ■

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at an election night rally in Budapest, April 3, 2022. Journalists newly experiencing autocratic and anti-media regimes are looking to their Hungarian counterparts for advice

IN TURKEY, ERDOĞAN'S SUPPRESSION OF THE MEDIA INTENSIFIES



Protesters demonstrate in June in Istanbul against a media bill that Turkey's government says will fight "disinformation." Media rights groups, however, argue the law would escalate a years-long crackdown on critical reporting

As the country prepares for next year's elections, the government is making it even harder for independent journalists to report

BY EMRE KIZILKAYA

REPORTING AT RISK

NOT LONG AFTER Turkish lawmakers aligned with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's administration presented the parliament with a bill to criminalize disinformation in late May, a new wave of arrests targeting journalists was launched, underlining the government's multipronged attempt to monopolize the right to decide on the "truth" ahead of the upcoming elections in June of 2023.

The Turkish bill is reminiscent of Russia's "fake news" law, which criminalized reporting accurately on Putin's invasion of Ukraine and triggered an exodus of journalists from the country. Ironically, some of those Russian journalists took refuge in Turkey, where Turkish reporters are now dealing with tactics similar to Putin's in several ways.

Like Putin, Erdoğan has disabled the free press over many years. Erdoğan's government passed "The Law

Against Crimes Committed Through Publication On The Internet" in 2007, amending it in the following years to give authorities increasingly more power to block websites. In 2020, another amendment targeted "foreign social network providers with daily access of more than one million users," saddling them with new obligations to the state, including the requirement to appoint a representative to Turkey and to respond to the privacy-based complaints from Turkish citizens in 48 hours. Meanwhile, Turkish penal code and anti-terror laws have been used to jail or legally harass hundreds of journalists.

Still, the "disinformation bill" that Erdoğan's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its ally Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) presented to parliament on May 26 is an unprecedented attempt to suppress journalism in Turkey. The seven leading journalism organizations based in the country voiced their concerns, warning that the bill "could lead to one of the heaviest censorship and self-censorship mechanisms in the history of [the Turkish] Republic." A coalition of 23 international media freedom organizations stood in solidarity with Turkey's journalists and called on the Turkish parliament to vote down the bill.

Another similarity between Erdoğan's bill and Putin's disinformation law is the vagueness in their wording. The Turkish bill uses broad concepts such as "disinformation," "fake news," "baseless information," and "distorted information" without any legal definition. It also refers to elusive notions as "public peace" and "public order." The courts are given the authority to make their own definitions and sanction individuals or media organizations

over what they deem disinformation. This is especially dangerous in a country where the judicial system is captured by ruling politicians and has been repeatedly accused of abusing laws to penalize critical journalism.

Some of the new sanctions in the bill include:

■ **Criminalizing disinformation:** Those who distribute what the government deems untruthful information publicly will be jailed from one to three years. If a source is quoted anonymously, then the punishment will increase by 50 percent. Although journalists are routinely put on trial in Turkey as terror suspects or for other causes such as defamation, the new law will give the authorities a more convenient tool to harass them over their reporting.

■ **Censorship by online refutation:** News websites will now be recognized by the state as part of "the press." Besides some marginal benefits, this step also means that these websites will be legally required to publish a refutation as newspapers do. In Turkey, refutations are used as a tool of censorship. In the past, Turkish news websites were ordered to take down content, such as corruption stories, dozens of times. With the new law, a digital news outlet that revealed a corruption case will not only be forced to delete its article but also to publish the refutation on the same hyperlink.

■ **Forcing social media companies to hand over personal data:** Social media platforms will be required to hand over their personal user data to Turkish prosecutors and courts. If they resist, Turkish authorities will throttle 90 percent of the bandwidth reserved for the platform, which effectively means blocking the service in Turkey.

DILARA SENKAYA/REUTERS

The government's domination of conventional media, and particularly broadcast networks, helps it retain the popular support of its core voter base. In the run up to the 2023 vote, Erdoğan seems to be using the same tactics used by Putin and Hungary's Viktor Orbán: war-mongering (military threats against Syria and Greece) and populist economic policies that risk the future of the country for immediate political gain (an aggressive push for lowering loan rates and imposing rent controls).

This strategy can only work if the government has more control over the flow of information, and digital media are a source of leaks for Erdoğan. Last year, my colleague Burak Ütücü and I published data that showed the reach and engagement of independent online journalism outlets are catching up with the pro-government media machine. The Erdoğan administration's latest moves against free speech in Turkey, including the disinformation law, are designed as a weapon against the rising tide of digital journalism at home and a new threat against technology platforms based abroad. In the coming months, the government — through the judicial system it fully controls — can use the disinformation law when it passes to arbitrarily decide what is true, sending more journalists and whistleblowers to jail.

Meanwhile, the government can use the same law to make companies like Google and Facebook work to its advantage. Our report, which was discussed extensively in a session of the Digital Platforms Commission of Turkey's parliament in December 2021, also revealed that Google's search algorithm heavily boosts Erdoğan's media, hence boosting pro-government disinformation and hate speech, while suppressing independent journalism, despite popular interest. It seems that Big Tech's commercial interests in Turkey trump the informational welfare of the democratic public.

The latest attempts at censorship aside, and regardless of the upcoming election results, independent journalism is alive and well in Turkey. Journalists — including many women, ethnic and religious minorities, the LGBTQI+ community, and younger reporters — keep reporting bravely in every corner of the country. They sometimes get jailed, harassed, and even murdered, but they keep finding new ways to build audiences and sustainable news outlets, frequently going viral on digital platforms, and now producing podcasts and newsletters, too.

According to a report by the Journalists' Union of Turkey, 26 journalists in Turkey were in jail as of May 3. More than 270 journalists were put on trial last year, 57 others were physically assaulted, and 54 news websites and 1,355 articles were blocked, while independent news outlets were forced to pay more than 10 million Turkish Liras as administrative fines over their reporting.

These numbers may soon rise because the press freedom situation in Turkey is likely to get worse before it gets better. Erdoğan's increasingly authoritarian government can now target digital media even more aggressively with the disinformation law as his re-election campaign gathers steam. As Rappler cofounder and Nobel Peace Prize Winner Maria Ressa asked in her Nobel speech, "How can you have election integrity if you don't have the integrity of facts?" ■

TUNISIAN JOURNALISTS FACE INTIMIDATION AND JAIL TIME FOR DOING OUR JOBS

As President Kais Saied consolidates his grip on power, Tunisia — and its media — are sliding backward from hard-won democratic gains

BY HANÈNE ZBISS

REPORTING AT RISK

IN THE EARLY MORNING of Oct. 3, 2021, Amer Ayed, a Tunisian journalist and TV presenter at Zitouna TV, was sleeping when police circled his home in the city of Monastir and dragged him in for questioning. “They scared my family and my children, and they didn’t give me even the time to change my clothes,” Ayed recalls.

He was charged with conspiring against state security and insulting the dignity of the president and the army. His supposed crime? Reciting on Oct. 1 “The Ruler,” a poem written by exiled Iraqi poet Ahmed Matar that calls out the abuses of Arab dictators. In the same broadcast, Ayed criticized Tunisian President Kais Saied’s move on Sept. 22 to suspend parts of the constitution and declare that he would rule without the input of Parliament. Ayed said it was a “coup d’etat” and called Saied a populist.

The police also shut down Zitouna TV, a private channel created in 2012 by Oussama Ben Salem, a son of Mohamed Ben Salem and a leader of Ennahda (the Tunisian Muslim Brotherhood), an Islamist political party.

After spending two months in jail, Ayed was released while his trial was ongoing. In April of this year, a military court sentenced him to four months in prison, a sentence he is appealing.

Ayed is not the only journalist facing repercussions for his work. Since July 25, 2021, when Saied suspended Parliament and dismissed the prime minister, Tunisia has slid backward from the democratic gains it made following the Jasmine Revolution, a month-long civil protest that led to the ouster of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in January 2011, who had been in office for 23 years. In 2014, the Tunisian constitution enshrined the right to “freedom of opinion, thought, expression, information and publication.”

But those rights began to be dismantled the day after Saied consolidated power, when police stormed the offices of Al Jazeera’s bureau, forcing journalists to leave and confiscating their equipment. Nearly a year later, the office remains closed. “We [never] received any official explanation for the closure or any adjudication,” says Lotfi Hajji, the Al Jazeera Tunisia bureau chief. “It was an arbitrary decision and one of the first indicators of the regression of freedom of expression in Tunisia.” Saied has also scheduled a referendum this summer to vote for a new constitution that will further erode the power of parliament, which Saied’s political opponents say will give him dictatorial powers.

This year, Tunisia dropped 21 spots on the World Press Freedom Index, published by Reporters Without Borders, slipping to 94 from 73 out of 180 countries. Journalists on every platform face real pressure as they navigate the new political situation and an environment that is growing increasingly hostile. “Practicing journalistic work becomes very difficult,” says Mohamed Yassine Jelassi, president of the Tunisian Journalists Union (SNJT). “The whole general environment in the country is full of hate speech against journalists. In fact, every time they cover [demonstrations] in the street, they are either attacked by the police or by the president’s supporters.”

According to the SNJT’s annual report on freedom of press in Tunisia, released in May, there were 214 attacks against journalists — consisting of physical and verbal aggression, incitement to violence, virtual harassment, confiscation of material, and arbitrary detention — between May 2021 and April 2022, most of them perpetrated by official authorities and social media activists supporting Saied. “If you are working for media that is not pro-Saied, you will be attacked verbally or physically, harassed, and prevented from exercising your profession by the police and the protesters,” notes Aymen Touihri, a photographer and journalist who works for Kashf Media, an indepen-



The National Union of Tunisian Journalists (SNJT) President Mohamed Yassine Jelassi speaks at a demonstration in front of the SNJT in Tunis in March

dent news website. The crackdown comes on top of the Covid-19 crisis, which has forced a handful of media organizations, especially newspapers, in Tunisia to shutter and others to move to digital-only editions. More than 190 journalists, according to SNJT, lost their jobs by early May 2020 because of the pandemic. That number is likely much higher now.

The intimidation of Tunisian journalists is meant to silence their criticisms of the regime. On March 18, police in Kairouan arrested Khalifa Guesmi, a correspondent for Radio Mosaique, Tunisia’s most listened to radio station, under a terrorism law to force him to reveal his sources. Guesmi spent a week in jail, during which he was harassed by investigators. “It is a shame that a journalist is arrested to reveal his sources,” says Guesmi. “I’m still shocked by the treatment that I had during the investigations. I was accused [of being] a traitor.” He believes the ordeal was an attempt to intimidate Radio Mosaique, which has been critical of Saied’s consolidation of power.

On June 11, Salah Attia, a journalist working for Aray Al Jadid, a website that covers politics, economics, and international news, was arrested and jailed after declaring on Al Jazeera television that Saied ordered the army to arrest leaders of a labor union to prevent a strike. He was accused by a military court of threatening state security and the army.

Despite the challenges, some independent outlets still offer quality independent journalism. AlQatiba, a

site specializing in investigative journalism founded in September 2020, was part of a media consortium that exposed how wealthy clients and clients who had been convicted of crimes like fraud and bribery used Credit Suisse to avoid paying taxes and get around financial disclosure laws. In August 2021, the organization also published an extensive explanatory article detailing the different possible governing scenarios for Tunisia after Saied seized more power on July 25.

AlQatiba is not alone. Other independent news outlets like Inkyfada — a non-profit based in Tunis — and Nawaat — a public interest newsroom — are continuing to do critical and quality journalism. Inkyfada published in March a data visualization project detailing how police violence has led to the deaths of at least 20 people in the last decade and explaining how newly formed police unions have made it difficult to hold people accountable. In June, Nawaat published an article criticizing Saied’s dismissal of 57 judges without due process.

Walid Mejri, the founder of AlQatiba, says it’s up to the independent press to inform the audience. Now perhaps more than ever reliable information is needed to help Tunisians understand the major events in the country. But the future, he says, is uncertain — as it is in many places around the world where freedoms are being restricted.

And for the media, the landscape is likely to get worse before it gets better. ■

IN GHANA, ONLY A HANDFUL OF JOURNALISTS ARE ABLE TO DO CRITICAL REPORTING



On paper, Ghana is a thriving democracy. On the ground, journalists face arrest, detention, and torture

BY EMMANUEL K. DOGBEVI

REPORTING AT RISK

FROM A DISTANCE, and on paper, Ghana is a thriving democracy in a region beset with political and social turmoil. The country's 1992 constitution has an entire chapter dedicated to freedom of the press, and three years ago on March 26, 2019, the country finally passed its Right to Information bill into law — a measure that was meant to guarantee access to public information for journalists. The law had been in the works for 20 years.

But on the ground, and in reality, journalists do not have the freedom to do their work, nor do they have free access to information. Government institutions often go to court to resist freedom of information requests by journalists. They also face risks of arrest, detention, and torture from state agencies like the police, military, secret service, and political operatives of ruling parties. The attacks have been systematic, and in nearly all cases,

no one has been held to account. Journalists have been assaulted in the open by police and military officers while they covered national events, and in some cases their equipment has been damaged. The attacks became such a common feature that in July 2021, the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) mobilized more than 600 people, including journalists and supporters of press freedom, to petition the country's Parliament to do something about the situation.

The violations are meant to intimidate journalists into silence so they don't expose corruption by government officials or their sponsors or publish and broadcast stories critical of people in public office. Some ruling party officials have consistently accused journalists who publish works critical of the government of trying to make the government unpopular, as that could affect their chances of winning future elections, considering the fact that public office has become a conduit for private gain. There is enough evidence to show that while state enterprises make huge losses every year, CEOs and other employees, often party apparatchiks appointed into these enterprises as a reward for helping political parties win elections, live ostentatious lives, and own properties with values well above their known salaries.

These attacks against journalists in Ghana have been increasing and intensifying — and the threat of physical violence is real. The journalist safety watchdog organization Reporters Without Borders (RSF) documented in May 2022, a total of 14 cases of abusive treatment of

journalists in Ghana — five arrests and nine cases of violence — since the start of the year.

The RSF was compelled to call on the Ghanaian authorities to take action and to guarantee the safety of media in the country, after more serious press freedom violations in early May, including a physical attack on a radio station, a physical attack on a news agency reporter, and the arrest of two TV journalists. Journalists from both private and state media are victims.

As a result of the increasing violations, Ghana fell on the Press Freedom Index 2022 from the third to tenth position in Africa and from 30th to the 60th position globally. While journalists are not fleeing the country, Manasseh Azure Awuni, the editor in chief of The Fourth Estate, an online publication known for investigative journalism, had to be taken out of the country for a while for his own safety.

Another journalist, Edward Adeti, who once worked as regional correspondent in Ghana's Upper East Region for Starr FM, a private radio station, was also threatened after he did stories exposing a corrupt public official. He was extracted from Bolgatanga, the regional capital to the national capital Accra for his own safety. Adeti has recounted how pressure was brought to bear on his landlord to evict him, and other landlords were warned not to rent their properties to him. Even though Adeti has reported the matter to the police, no one has been arrested.

While the government's public posture says it is protecting journalists to do their work, there is not a single

known record of persons or groups facing prosecution for unlawful arrests, detention, or torture of journalists. Especially, politically connected people openly threaten and attack journalists without any repercussions, which further emboldens them.

One of the highest profile killings of a journalist happened on Jan. 16, 2019, when hitmen shot investigative journalist Ahmed Hussein-Suale in his car. He died instantly, slumped over the steering wheel. Hussein-Suale worked for Tiger Eye, an investigative journalism organization. He had been threatened many times and was snuck out of the country for his own safety. He returned only after his employers felt the threat had decreased. After his return, Kennedy Agyapong, a member of Parliament aligned with the ruling party who also owns a string of radio and TV stations, went on one of his TV stations and showed photos of Hussein-Suale and his colleague, investigative journalist Anas Aremeyaw Anas, urging his supporters to attack them and if these supporters were taken to court, he promised to pay for the cost.

Before then, Hussein-Suale's face wasn't known, except to his close relations and friends, some of who didn't even know he worked as an undercover journalist with Anas, who also covers his face whenever he was in public.

Not long before Agyapong made the threats, Tiger Eye published a major investigation on corruption in Ghanaian football that caught the former chairman of the Ghana Football Association, Kwesi Nyantakyi, on video talking with who he believed was an Arab businessman about how connected he was with the government and how he could bribe the president to get contracts for the businessman; the meeting had been arranged by Hussein-Suale. Nyantakyi also mentioned that Agyapong has amassed power because he is one of the biggest financiers of the ruling New Patriotic Party (NPP) and how he holds sway in appointing leadership for some of the lucrative ministries. That video shook the very foundation of Ghanaian football and led to the dismissal of Nyantakyi, who had been untouchable. Three years after the killing, no one has been arrested.

There is a general sense of fear among most journalists, who often worry about losing their jobs or fear their media houses would lose advertising revenue from businesses connected to the government. Often withholding or withdrawing advertising is used as a means of punishing media whose reporting is considered unfavorable to people in power.

There are very limited funding opportunities for independent reporting in Ghana. Some of the courageous journalists who continue to do critical work are fortunate to be working with well-resourced private media houses; others continue to work without pay, while they make a living doing other things on the side. Freelance journalism doesn't exist in Ghana, because media organizations in the country do not pay for freelance work. As a result of the continuing violence, only a few independent journalists are able to continue to do critical reporting, especially journalism that holds power to account. These journalists depend on raw courage, grit, and love of country to keep going. ■

People watch the Tiger Eye investigative documentary "Number 12" about former Ghanaian Football Association (GFA) president Kwesi Nyantakyi in Accra. Ahmed Hussein-Suale, a reporter for Tiger Eye, was killed following the investigation

CRISTINA AALDEHUELA/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

THE MYANMAR JUNTA'S WANTON VIOLENCE IS FORCING JOURNALISTS TO FLEE



Exiled reporters are finding it difficult to reach sources back home, who are increasingly afraid to talk

BY DANNY FENSTER

REPORTING AT RISK

ON NOV. 21, 2021, my colleague at investigative news magazine Frontier Myanmar, Zar, wiped her laptop and phone of all data and packed them into a single bag with a few other belongings, then headed for Yangon International Airport. Deciding to board the plane that day, she told me recently, was among the hardest decisions she'd ever had to make. (Zar's full name is being withheld for security concerns.)

The year prior had trained her well in the art of uprooting. For several months following Feb. 1, when the Myanmar military rolled tanks into the capital, arresting elected lawmakers, and declaring the country's return to military rule, Zar stayed on in her trendy, central Yangon neighborhood, where most of her neighbors didn't know she was a journalist, she said. But by August, uniformed soldiers were toting rifles up and down her street, looking for journalists and student protesters.

Zar, a multimedia reporter, glanced around her apartment: The living room was littered with notebooks, the

desk covered in audio cables and recorders. Cameras and memory cards sat scattered across the table. She packed a bag and fled, first to her mother's home in a rural village, where she edited audio stories in secret. She worried though, that in such a small town, her neighbors knew what she was doing. Few supported the new regime, but everyone was growing fearful of one another.

Zar's experience is typical of Myanmar journalists who are determined to keep working despite the risks.

Fear of journalism — of both performing it and of getting anywhere near it — is nothing new in Myanmar. Alarming, it is also increasingly prevalent around the globe.

We are in the midst of a several-years-long trend of rising authoritarianism and the consequent shrinking of the space for free and independent journalism, which means it is becoming increasingly difficult for people to get accurate and reliable information around the world. In its most recent annual report on global press freedoms, Reporters Without Borders ranked Myanmar at 176, just behind China, but the trend is broader than Asia. Twenty-eight countries — a record high that includes Turkmenistan, Iran, and Eritrea — were classified as “very bad” for press freedoms. Many more saw a decrease in access to reliable information.

A 2006 Nieman Reports article on Myanmar noted at the time that the military government was “tracking down people who give information to international media” for persecution. For generations, the military forced its people into a sort of international solitary confinement, creating a black hole of despotism where little information ever came in or went out. Around 2011,

however, the military slowly began a process of democratizing the country, holding internationally credible elections, sharing power with the civilian leaders thereby elected, reforming media censorship laws, and inviting foreign journalists in.

This progress was swiftly erased on Feb. 1, 2021; since then, the junta has murdered thousands of civilians in the targeted killing of its critics and in indiscriminate aerial and arson attacks on entire villages. More than 100 journalists have been arrested, including this writer, and 60 remain in custody, according to Reporters Without Borders. One was tortured to death. The room Zar slept in at her mother's had iron bars over the windows, but her mother removed them when Zar arrived, so she could slip out quickly if police came. “I had a plan to run to the monastery,” she told me. “I was always ready to run.”

Before that ever happened, local administrators warned her that military police had already begun inquiring about a journalist in town. Zar packed her bag again and went to her father's. There she recorded her podcast, about human rights in Myanmar, in a guest room atop a motorbike repair shop, waiting until all customers had left to make any noise.

She fled to the Yangon newsroom of Frontier Myanmar, at a friend's who had internet. She would cue up a movie and pretend to watch until her friend left the room, then upload the files. The internet worked about 30 percent of the time, she said.

In tandem with its violence, the junta has also launched a barrage of ham-fisted legal and technical attacks to try

to silence reporting, including instituting blanket internet cuts that have made basic, daily transactions nearly impossible, but also stripping the country's leading news outlets of their publishing licenses and banning the use of words like “coup” and “junta.” Increasingly, however, they've been struggling just to keep the lights on. In October, it became clear that as much of our newsroom as possible should get out of the country. On Nov. 21, Zar packed her bag again.

“At the airport, I thought, ‘I really don't want to leave. My friends are all here, and I don't know when I'll come back,’” she said. “I really wanted to cry.”

This past April, I met Zar at the home she now shares with several other journalists on the suburban outskirts of a foreign city. She showed me where she recorded the podcast, usually crouched under a table, a blanket strewn over it, and a phalanx of pillows surrounding her to muffle any background noise. She said the sound wasn't great, but that it was the least of her problems. Back across the border, sources were afraid to speak over the phone, if they could be reached at all. Internet and electricity were constantly out.

This was among the primary complaints reporters from Myanmar voiced to me: the inability to get on-the-ground accounts, the impossibility of verification. Myanmar has descended into a worsening, nationwide civil war, with small, ad hoc bands of resistance fighters waging courageous battles against the military, followed by a rise of allegedly military-backed clandestine “hit squads” known as thway-thout-ah-pwe, or “blood drinkers.” Each side reports overwhelming victories for themselves and devastating losses for the other, leaving far-removed reporters to make sense of such impossible arithmetic.

Those years spent in imposed isolation have made Myanmar poorer and less developed than its neighbors, who often discriminate against Burmese people. Reporters told me stories of being turned down from apartment after apartment, with at least one landlord saying outright they won't rent to Burmese people; of being singled out for extra screening at government offices when renewing or applying for visas; and of the frustrations of just trying to make daily purchases without speaking the local language.

Still, these reporters are producing phenomenal journalism, exposing the authoritarians' crimes to the world and to local populations, who continue finding ways to connect to the internet and the world outside. Even as the junta attempts to block that and other sites from within the country, the residents of Myanmar evaded the blockades with VPNs and other digital tools. Yet the sustainability of all of this is precarious. When Zar packed her bag, she thought she'd only be gone a year. “I thought: one year, and we will win,” she said, referring to the many groups still fighting a return to military rule. “Now, I think it will be longer.”

If she does return, she said she'll have to go by land, illegally — probably through the territory of armed resistance fighters. That may not be much of a deterrent; she's eager to return to Myanmar and stay. “I really miss my country,” she said. “I want to go back home.” ■

Police arrest Myanmar Now journalist Kay Zon Nwe in Yangon on Feb. 27, 2021, as protesters took part in a demonstration against the military coup

YE AUNG THU/AP/APP VIA GETTY IMAGES

JUDGES, TOO, CAN BE ENEMIES OF THE PRESS

In Malaysia, news organizations can find themselves on the losing end of expensive lawsuits

BY STEVEN GAN

REPORTING AT RISK

ENEMIES OF PRESS FREEDOM come in all shapes and sizes. Some are in military uniforms. Others in business suits. A few are in religious garb. And there are those in fancy robes too.

And while restrictive laws are the main focus in our fight for press freedom, there are also innocuous forms of control — through ownership of media organizations and cutting off advertising that many media rely on, among others.

Take Apple Daily in Hong Kong. Its publisher, editors, and journalists were arrested last year. But what dealt the death blow to the newspaper was the freezing of its bank accounts. That effectively forced the company to pull the plug as it could not pay the salaries of its journalists.

Another insidious way of eroding press freedom is through the courts. Over the years, Malaysiakini has faced numerous legal actions — plus in-your-face harassment — in an attempt to punish us, if not shut us down completely.

We were the first media organization in Malaysia's history to be hit with a lawsuit from a sitting prime minister. Najib Razak eventually withdrew the suit after he lost power four years ago.

Currently, we are fighting a lawsuit from Najib's former deputy, who is also facing dozens of charges in court for corruption. He is seen as a potential prime minister should his Umno party return to power in the upcoming national elections.

We were also slapped with several other lawsuits, most of them from politicians. A few we won, but most we lost. The chances of winning diminish as our cases move up to the higher courts, which have apparently more conservative judges.

Granted, not all judges agree with one another.

Unfortunately, in our case, those judges who believe in fundamental freedoms — freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear — are a minority.

An example is last year's 6-1 Federal Court decision in Malaysiakini's contempt of court case where we received a \$124,000 fine over comments posted by our readers. But while we were shocked by the hefty fine, we were dumbfounded when we raised the full amount from crowdfunding in four hours, perhaps the fastest crowdfunding exercise in Malaysian history.

Five months later, Malaysiakini was again forced by the Federal Court to pay about \$126,000 to a defunct gold mine company for our reporting on the health concerns of villagers who were worried about the cyanide used by the company. It was a 3-2 split decision.

Judge Harmindar Singh Dhaliwal, in delivering the minority opinion, said in his judgment:

"As a parting rejoinder, it must be said, and this is beyond dispute, that the press and the journalists play a crucial role in reporting matters of public interest and matters of serious public concern.

"In its role as a watchdog for the people, the awareness created by such media reports will by and large lead to greater protection of society as a whole. In carrying out this duty, the press may at times get the facts wrong.

"However, in matters of public interest, so long as the press holds a reasonable belief that the publication is in the public interest or that the publication is a fair, accurate and impartial account of a dispute, the press and journalists are entitled to the protection of the law."

Only one other judge agreed with Harmindar's decision while the other three argued that Malaysiakini had violated the rights of the gold mine company.

Four years ago, when the Court of Appeal reversed a High Court decision and ordered Malaysiakini to pay nearly \$80,000 in damages to the gold mine, we raised the amount from our supporters in less than two weeks. (It was this decision that Malaysiakini had appealed to the Federal Court — the country's highest court — which ended in defeat. Malaysiakini was ordered to pay an additional \$45,000.)

And as a way to thank our supporters, we held a free premiere screening of the movie *The Post*.



TOP: ANNICE LYX/GETTY IMAGES
BOTTOM: VINCENT THIAN/AP PHOTO

Starring Tom Hanks and Meryl Streep, the film depicts journalists at *The Washington Post* who published the infamous Pentagon Papers, a set of classified documents on the involvement of the U.S. government in the Vietnam War. The U.S. government retaliated by filing a suit against the newspaper.

At the tail end of the movie, a *Washington Post* journalist reported what Justice Hugo Black said in the landmark 6-3 US Supreme Court decision: "The founding fathers gave the free press the protection it must have to fulfill its essential role in our democracy. The press was to serve the governed, not the governors."

We are not so fortunate here in Malaysia. Given that the majority in all three branches of government — the executive, legislative, and judiciary — believe that the press serves the governors, not the governed, the powerful, not the powerless, it is incumbent on us to defend "the free press."

Despite the recent judgments against Malaysiakini, we shall continue to report without fear or favor. But we cannot do it alone. We need your help. Yes, you. ■

ABOVE: A protester demands the arrest of Malaysian anti-corruption chief Azam Baki at a demonstration in Jan. 2022

LEFT: Steven Gan addresses media after Attorney General Idrus Harun filed contempt proceedings against Malaysiakini over comments made by five readers on its portal

IN THE PHILIPPINES, JOURNALISM IS ACTIVISM

The rise of hyper-partisan influencers has made it easier for those seeking power to control the flow of information

BY GLENDA M. GLORIA

REPORTING AT RISK

A DAY AFTER Ferdinand Marcos Jr. was proclaimed president of the Philippines on May 25, he granted an interview to only three reporters while his spokesperson faced the rest of the media that day.

Two of the lucky ones belonged to partisan broadcast networks owned by church leaders who had backed Marcos' presidential bid, including a doomsday preacher wanted by the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation for human trafficking.

In the world we used to know, a massive election victory would make any candidate magnanimous. It didn't seem that way in the Philippines. When it looked certain that Ferdinand Marcos Jr., heir to the late Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos, had won the May 9 presidential race by a landslide, his spokesperson held a press con-

ference where he snubbed our Rappler reporter's questions six times, each time turning his eyes and attention to others in the room.

Not long after, the president-elect named a prominent vlogger, who often lambasted journalists under the Duterte era, as his press secretary; she also happens to be a lawyer who was once suspended for three years by the Supreme Court for being remiss in her duties to a client. When asked, she said, yes, she would push for the accreditation of bloggers and vloggers to the Malacañang Press Corps, the once-elite club of reporters assigned to cover the presidency.

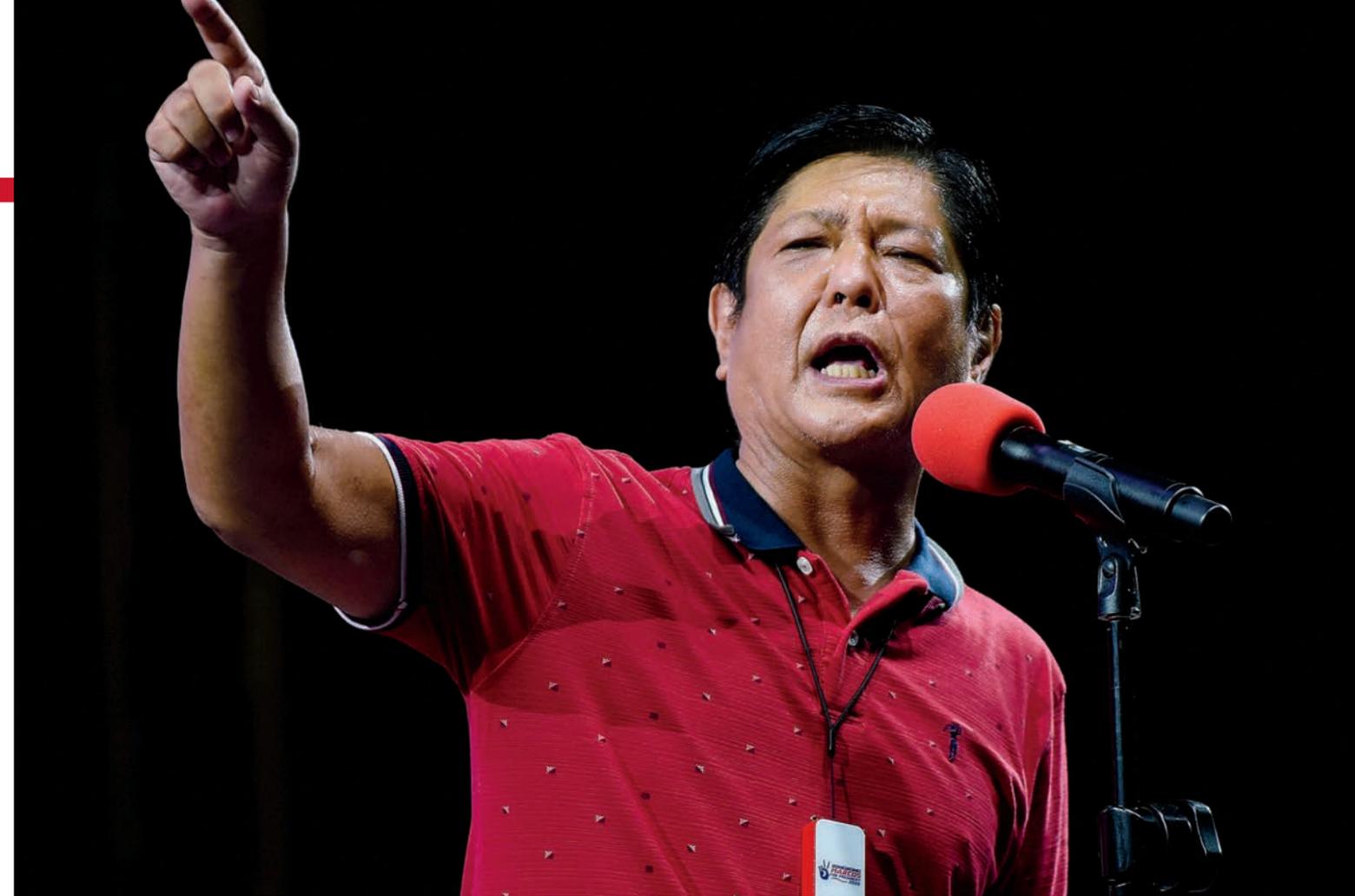
Is this a portent of things to come under the Marcos presidency, or just a hangover from a campaign that pushed aside journalists and favored social media influencers and TikTokers?

It's no exaggeration to say that many Filipino journalists were looking forward to a new president on June 30, when strongman Rodrigo Duterte ended his six-year term in office. Duterte had given the media hell, Rappler in particular. Among other threats, we were slapped with a closure order — which is on appeal in court — for what the government said was a violation of the constitutional ban on foreign ownership, and the country's biggest media company was shut down at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. Journalists, activists, and lawyers were subjected to the most vicious online attacks that translated to real-world harm. For example, after being trolled online for being “communist,” journalist Lady Ann Salem was arrested in December 2020 on charges of illegal possession of firearms. The court dismissed the charges and released her three months later.

As this happened, the internet further gave rise to hyper-partisan social media personalities who gained fame and power for the simple reason that they hated the “biased” media and tagged government critics as communists. Marcos seized that space, spending the last several years YouTubing his way to the hearts and minds of Filipinos, who were told the lie that his father's kleptocratic regime represented the Philippines “golden age.” By the time he declared his plans to run for president last year, that lie had become the truth.

Marcos thus comes to the presidency with a worldview shared by autocrats all over the world: They've come this far despite journalists' constant badgering and questioning and hard-nosed exposés. In the case of Marcos, he won even though he had skipped all the presidential debates organized by the elections commission and dodged questions from pesky journalists via a tight security cordon. Indeed, even in a country where elections are bought and patronage runs deep, at no other time in recent memory have propaganda and lying been most effective in winning the battle for the vote.

Thus, it would probably take a lot of convincing for Marcos to see why journalists deserved his or his govern-



ment's time. This mindset will, of course, be challenged by the urge to put his best foot forward before the rest of the world to prove he's no push-over.

How he will navigate that is entirely up to him. Will he continue to rely on his reliable army of propagandists and image-makers to flex their skills on the global stage of disinformation? Or will he recognize the requirements of public leadership — to answer uncomfortable questions, live with scrutiny, and to be transparent in how he will run a country of 112 million, at least 31 million of whom elected him president?

And what about us, journalists — what to do?

At Rappler, we learned the hard way how and why journalism is a mission that's not for those merely passing through.

In the face of a tyrant, you can't — mustn't — blink.

In the face of threats, you can pause but can't — mustn't — stop.

In a well of disinformation, you can't — mustn't — sink.

It is tempting to describe the problems of journalism — its relevance, its business model, its environment, its people — as irreversible and perhaps incurable. And there are various examples to show the seeming inevitability of defeat.

But we must also acknowledge and celebrate the instances when journalists bucked and continue to buck the trend.

LISA MARIE DAVID/REUTERS

At Rappler, we learned that crisis is opportunity — but that opportunity works only when seen through a mission bigger than our egos and only when seized along with the public we serve.

For journalism to matter, the community must be a part of it. In our crisis years under Duterte, we realized that we had a core audience that, while not massive, shared the same ideals that we believed in, which is the public's need to scrutinize and temper power. We went out of our way to engage them. We asked for their help, we tapped into their expertise, we listened to their advice. In a climate of fear, we took arduous steps to build partnerships with them.

Then and now, the battle to save journalism cannot be fought by journalists alone. It's a battle we must share — and fight — with other groups and citizens.

Each time our freedoms are threatened, we should have no qualms engaging other democracy frontliners and participating in collective efforts to resist authoritarianism.

For, indeed, journalism is activism; this has never been debated in our part of the world.

So will Marcos give Filipino journalists hell, like Duterte did?

The Duterte years should tell him that the fires of freedom in his country have not been extinguished — certainly not by the blood spilled on Manila's streets nor by the fatal algorithms that pulled the trigger. ■

Newly-elected president Ferdinand Marcos Jr. speaks at a campaign rally in February. Marcos has seized the influencer space, spreading the lie that his father's autocratic regime was the Philippines' “golden age”



REPORTING
AT RISK

**AMERICAN DEMOCRACY IS UNDER THREAT —
AND NEWSROOMS ARE MOBILIZING TO COVER IT**

Reporters need to focus on local election agencies
and move beyond horse race political coverage

BY CELESTE KATZ MARSTON ILLUSTRATION BY DOUG CHAYKA



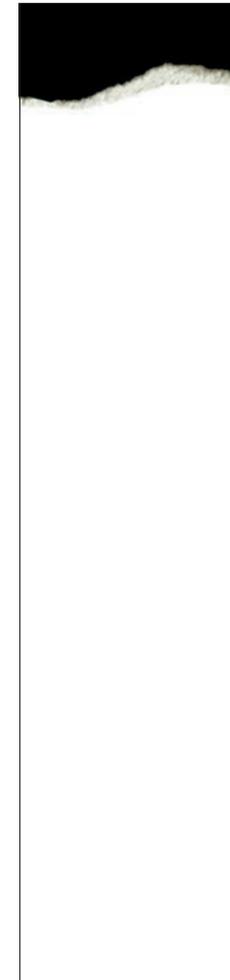
THINK ABOUT A “THREAT TO DEMOCRACY,” and it’s easy to conjure up an image of the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021 — the nation’s very seat of government besieged by rioters convinced that the presidential election was rigged.

American democracy teetered on its foundations that day. There was no shortage of coverage of the insurrection, which was historic, dystopian — and because of its powerful visuals and evolving storyline, perfectly suited for the 24-hour news cycle.

BRITTANY GREESON/NEW YORK TIMES VIA REDUX

While the insurrection was a wake-up call for the nation as a whole, and the profession of reporting in particular, covering it long term isn’t as clear cut as covering a riot. For a responsible free press, guarding democracy is much more akin to “watching a leak,” says Tony Marciano, managing editor of Southern California Public Radio (KPCC) and LAist, which is launching a civics and democracy beat. “You have to pay attention, because that leak could turn into a crack that can turn into damage, and the next thing you know, your house is falling down.”

In other words, if the real story of the dangers to the



A Detroit Department of Elections worker pushes the crowd back as absentee ballots are counted on Nov. 4, 2020. Outlets developing democracy beats are delving into the laws that govern elections and the people who administer them

U.S. system of government is to be told, it won’t necessarily be a made-for-T.V. mutiny. Instead, it will happen at local election agencies, statehouses, and school boards. But connecting the dots between what’s going on in disparate communities and menaces on a greater scale takes vigilance — and a willingness to look beyond both traditional horse race coverage and bothsidesism. Simply reporting that certain officials “claim” the 2020 presidential election was rigged by fraudulent voting or voting machine hacks and others “deny” those claims isn’t a framing that goes far enough because there’s no evidence for widespread, game-changing malfeasance. And, giving a platform to former government officials who were actively involved in trying to subvert the 2020 election — like many of the Sunday talk shows do — can normalize their actions.

But news outlets from Washington to California are refocusing their efforts on covering threats to democracy. (It’s also not a strictly American idea: In 2017, the BBC created the Local Democracy Reporting Service to drill down on local and regional seats of power.) This reinvigorated approach to reporting in the wake of the Jan. 6 insurrection can take many forms: In recent months, KUNR Public Radio in Reno, Nevada, went in search of “an innovative Democracy Reporter” to cover the swing state, noting, “This beat is not ‘business as usual’ political reporting.” Boston’s GBH, another public radio station, listed a job earlier this year for “an intrepid reporter to cover Massachusetts politics and policy at the intersection of voters and democracy.” In February, The Washington Post announced it was creating a “democracy desk” to cover threats both at the local and federal levels.

In some ways, the creation of these desks or beats is a formal acknowledgment that the media should see defending democracy as a full-time job, and that the erosion of institutional norms began long before the assault on the Capitol. Sarah Repucci, who co-wrote the report “Freedom in the World 2022: The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule” for the nonprofit Freedom House, says the strength of Americans’ access to rights and liberties relative to citizens of other countries started eroding about a decade ago. “The U.S. is still a free country, but it has slipped from being among the best performers in the world and among what we often might think of as our peers, like the U.K. and Germany,” says Repucci. “We are down among countries that you might not think of as much as peers,” such as Romania and Panama. Freedom House bases its scores on 15 civil liberties indicators and 10 political rights indicators including electoral process, functioning of government, and freedom of expression and belief.

The problem is multifaceted, she says: Some of the American decline can be attributed to ongoing systemic discrimination, to the undermining of public trust in elections “due to groundless claims of fraud,” and to the loss of independent news outlets that hold government accountable and educate the electorate. There has been a proliferation of state bills designed to restrict access to mail-in voting or constrict the amount of time the polls can be open. In Georgia, a traditionally red state



**This is
“a story that
goes way
beyond politics.
It’s actually a
story about our
relationship
as citizens
with our
government”**

MATEA GOLD
NATIONAL EDITOR,
WASHINGTON POST

that President Biden won and where Democrats picked up two Senate seats, a law passed that gives the partisan state legislature more control over the administration of elections. The Republican nominee for governor in Pennsylvania has tried to overturn the state’s results in the 2020 election, has been subpoenaed to talk about his role in the Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection (though he denies doing anything illegal), and would have the power to appoint the secretary of state, if elected. For these reasons and more, outlets developing democracy beats are delving into the laws that govern elections and the people who administer them — areas that traditionally received little in-depth coverage when compared to the horserace.

It’s been clear for a while now that American democracy is in crisis. Barton Gellman, writing in December 2021 for *The Atlantic* under the headline, “Trump’s Next Coup Has Already Begun,” didn’t mince words: “The prospect of this democratic collapse is not remote. People with the motive to make it happen are manufacturing the means. Given the opportunity, they will act. They are acting already.” Indeed, Republican conspiracy theorists have been elected to Congress, and people who support the former president’s lie that the 2020 election was stolen are running for key positions overseeing elections. There are at least a dozen running for attorney general in states like Wisconsin, Michigan, and Arizona.

In putting together teams to address this threat, any outlet has to navigate a flock of concerns and questions: What should it cover — that is, what specifically constitutes a danger to democracy? What’s the best way to leverage possibly scarce resources and staff to address it? And which strategies help that information get to the people who need it most — including outside an outlet’s existing core audience?

PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH shows there’s potentially a very large audience for reporting that illuminates the fragility of U.S. democracy. In short, Americans are worried.

About a year after the attack on the Capitol, Americans were apparently “deeply pessimistic about the future of democracy,” per the result of an NPR/Ipsos poll that found 64 percent felt the system was “in crisis and at risk of failing.” Almost two thirds of those polled said they agreed U.S. democracy was more at risk than it had been a year earlier. Similarly, a national poll of young Americans released in December 2021 by the Harvard Kennedy School’s Institute of Politics found that a majority — 52 percent — of 18- to 29-year-olds considered the U.S. either “a democracy in trouble” or “a failed democracy.”

“I think a lot of Americans learned more about how their elections work because of what happened in 2020 than ever before. And we find readers are intensely interested in this process now,” says Matea Gold, national editor of *The Washington Post*.

The Post’s democracy desk setup includes the hiring of two editors along with three reporters stationed in Georgia, Arizona, and the upper Midwest. The Post named Griff Witte, a two-decade veteran of the paper, as democracy editor in late April; Matt Brown, formerly



of *USA Today*, began work as the Georgia-based reporter at the end of March. Peter Wallsten, senior national investigations editor, is overseeing the team.

Gold says the paper started development of the new desk before the Capitol insurrection.

“As I was mobilizing our coverage around voting in 2020, it became really clear that that would be an incredibly singular year for voting, just because of the pandemic,” she says. “We started putting together a pretty robust staffing plan to make sure that we had a very strong network of reporters who could cover developments in different states.”

Because *The Post* had those reporters in position, Gold says, they were prepared when “the story sort of changed midstream to being one about the pressures on a voting system in a pandemic to the pressures on an election system when a sitting president seeks to overturn the election results.”

In creating a formal democracy desk, *The Post* is focusing on “mastering and understanding what was happening on the ground when it came to both voting and elections, but also [the] more diffused impacts [on] how people view their government at this moment,” she says. “Do people still have trust in their public officials and the very process of electing our officials?”

For *The Post*, “this is a story that stretches into so many different beats, so it’s very important to us that we had a hub that really was helping bring together the strands of that reporting and making sense of it for readers,” Gold says.

ELIJAH NOUVELAGE/THE WASHINGTON POST VIA GETTY IMAGES

and regional issues. Democracy, and threats to it, Gold says, is “a story that goes way beyond politics. It’s actually a story about our relationship as citizens with our government.” A late April story looked at Georgia’s Republican gubernatorial primary through the lens of how “unproven claims that fraud tainted the 2020 election” might affect voters’ attitudes about the race. Another piece reported out of Michigan plumbed GOP leaders’ concerns that “the spread of election conspiracies is alienating swing voters and undermining public trust of elections.” Both pieces examine the lingering legacy of the former president, who has continued to push his discredited story of having lost a “rigged” election to Joe Biden.

To that end, *The Post* and other outlets are hiring or reconfiguring staff and recalibrating or expanding coverage, focusing on how to reach not only their current audiences with this reporting, but those outside that circle — including those who’ve cultivated a profound distrust of “mainstream” media, get their information from partisan outlets, or simply don’t have the time or inclination to focus on politics and politics-adjacent news. At *The Post*, Gold said, part of connecting with distrustful readers is explaining “how we do our work, why it’s credible, the lengths we go to verify information. ... Educating people about what goes into our reporting is part of helping deepen the trust that they can feel in the ultimate stories that we produce.” (*The Post*’s website lays out its policies on attribution and the use of anonymous sources, for example.)

KPCC takes this seriously — so much so, managing editor Marcano says, that their new democracy reporter job is specifically set up to work hand-in-hand with an engagement producer. Part of the producer’s job is to help the station understand what information the audience wants and the best ways to deliver it to the people who need it. In May, for example, KPCC/LAist debuted an interactive “Meet Your Mayor” feature that helps the audience “match” itself with candidates that most align with their values. The feature is based on the candidates’ answers to audience-submitted questions, making the public the central focus of the feature before it was even published.

KPCC experimented with this back in 2015 with a unique series called *Make Al Care*, which centered on a Los Angeles County chef who had never voted in a local election to tell a bigger story about confronting voter apathy. The project, which asked readers to share reasons why Al should vote, was an effort to address one of the top challenges newsrooms face in covering civics and menaces to the democratic system: This stuff is existentially important, but in practice, it can be wonky and hard to cover in an engaging way.

Data visualization and interactives can also play a part, as with a Jan. 2022 *New York Times* feature that lets people gerrymander their own districts, essentially making a dry — but important to democracy — function into a sort of game. KPCC/LAist’s first major foray into the new democracy coverage is a “Voter Game Plan” project that includes a detailed FAQ on voting in L.A. County’s June primary, a way to ask questions

Elbert Solomon (right), the vice chairman of the Spalding County Democratic Commission, at a voter registration event on May 6 in Griffin, Ga. Covering the mechanics of elections is becoming increasingly important



“This beat is not ‘business as usual’ political reporting”

KUNR PUBLIC RADIO JOB LISTING

about voting, several voter guides (some of which were produced by nonprofit partner newsroom CalMatters), and a customizable virtual ballot that voters can fill out, print, and take to the polls with them.

Defining the beat and then figuring out how to present it most compellingly is part of what makes for effective coverage. At independent, nonprofit ProPublica, Editor-in-Chief Stephen Engelberg has given a lot of thought to how a democracy beat should work and what it should and should not be.

Engleberg cautions that “threats to democracy” don’t equate to “people whose opinions we don’t like [who] legitimately came into power.” As he puts it, “there are people all over the place running for school boards and they’re getting out the vote and getting elected and their views are sort of more extreme than mine,” someone might say, “That’s a threat to democracy. Well, no — that is democracy.”

However, “there are an awful lot of efforts that you can see in various state legislatures to adjust the electorate to favor one side or another, or to adjust the voting boundaries to favor one side or another,” he says. “I think those are very, very much legitimate things to cover.”

In June 2021, ProPublica announced it hired Alexandra Berzon to cover “risks to democracy.” She subsequently moved to The New York Times in a similar role; ProPublica announced in April 2022 that it had hired Andy Kroll, formerly of Rolling Stone and Mother Jones, for that job.

In September, Berzon and other ProPublica reporters teamed up to investigate how election-denying followers of former Trump adviser Steve Bannon had mobilized to enlist as low-level GOP precinct officers, exerting a new level of control on the party from the very grassroots. Bannon, the piece explains, argued to his followers that Trump had been sold out by the Republican Party, and the answer was to rebuild the party from the ground up. “The result is a nationwide groundswell of party activists whose central goal is not merely to win elections but to reshape their machinery,” ProPublica reported. These new low-level officials have gone to work in their respective states to unseat Republican leaders who pushed back against Trump’s election-rigging lies and questionable audits and have worked in support of state-level voting restrictions. The story underscores a critical facet of what a new era of democracy reporting needs to do: shine light on offices, elections, and government functions that some editors have too often dismissed in the past as second-tier stories — too granular, too time consuming, too low-stakes compared to coverage of races for president or even governor.

But research, including by the Brookings Institution, has shown that diminished coverage of House races by local media is related to decreased participation in the civic process and less government accountability.

Some of this may be changing as news outlets bring threats to democracy into sharper focus.

For example, while the 2022 midterm elections for Congress may be the big focus of some national (and local) media outlets, this year will also see contests for



offices like secretary of state, which oversee the mechanics of elections. Secretary of state races have “historically attracted little notice and even less money,” as The Guardian noted in March. But the secretary office is garnering more attention from voters, donors, and the press because of its key role in overseeing elections — especially in swing states.

WHEN LOOKING AT EVOLVING COVERAGE of threats to democracy — including the language journalists use to describe the threats — it’s useful to draw a parallel to how the media currently covers climate change versus how it did so in the past, says Jane Hall, associate professor at American University’s School of Communication and author of “Politics and the Media: Intersections and New Directions.”

“We know from political science [that if] you don’t connect the dots for people, they don’t really know how to hold public officials accountable,” Hall says. That was borne out over time in the “debate” over climate, both in what she calls the “hesitance” of news media to directly attribute environmental change to human behavior and the practice of “giving equal weight” to both those who believed in climate change and those who did not.

Over time — as news outlets revealed that climate change deniers received funding from the fossil fuel industry — the bothsidesism began to erode, Hall says. As the University of Colorado-based Media and Climate Change Observatory noted at the end of 2021, not only are U.S. media outlets covering climate change more, but the language in these reports is more point-

ed: Phrases like “global warming” are on the wane, and terms such as “climate catastrophe” are on the upswing.

News outlets — notably in the Trump and post-Trump era — have been re-evaluating the use of the word “lie” in their reporting. There’s been a hesitancy to use it by outlets, reporters, and editors who say it at least implies the intent to deliberately mislead when the person in question may possibly just be confused or mistaken.

To a degree, a reporter might technically fulfill his or her mission by presenting the audience with a “this is what the person said” statement augmented by a “but this is the evidence to the contrary” clause. However — as the Trump era brightly highlighted — the press will often need to go further, drawing a distinction between a possible verbal gaffe, exaggeration, and a calculated, deliberate falsehood. Even before Donald Trump’s inauguration, Masha Gessen sounded an alarm in the *The New York Review*, saying he and Russia’s Vladimir Putin had track records of lying “to assert power over truth itself.” To media charged with covering leaders who demonstrate their clout by claiming the right to disavow facts at their convenience, Gessen said, “It is time to raise the stakes from fact to truth.” News outlets are getting more comfortable using the word “lie,” as that’s how many described what Rep. Kevin McCarthy did when he denied telling colleagues that Trump should resign after the insurrection even though *New York Times* reporters had him on tape.

“There’s still a reluctance to recognize just how severe the danger really is — and it’s not just among journalists,” says Monika Bauerlein, chief executive officer of *Mother Jones* magazine. “I think it’s also driven to some extent by the fact that a lot of political journalism

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takes its cues from the political establishment and elected officials, [and] there was also, I think, a reluctance among that group to really jump up and down about American democracy itself being at risk.”

Bauerlein — in a Dec. 2021 piece titled “What if Media Covered the War on Democracy Like an Actual War?” — argued that the media’s track record of covering perils to democracy incrementally and covering the politics surrounding it like a spectator sport instead of a snowballing national emergency, “represents a terrifying failure of our profession.” What if, she wrote, “we covered a wave of election rigging from coast to coast with the same fervor as a bump in inflation or a showdown in the Senate?”

In early April 2022, Reveal from The Center for Investigative Reporting rolled out a major investigation, “Inside the GOP’s Purge of Local Election Officials in Michigan,” which showed how Michigan has become a “test lab of the anti-democratic movement.” The piece details how Republicans were purging sitting election officials and replacing them with people who questioned the legitimacy of the 2020 outcome. It emphasized that what has long been seen as a “mundane bureaucratic process” — the work of county election canvassing boards — is now becoming a potential pivot point to further undermine trust in the entire voting process.

Andy Donohue, executive editor for projects at Reveal, says initially, the outlet took a broader-brush approach looking at multiple states but eventually settled on reporting about Michigan because “it was looking like a testing lab for the anti-democratic movement.”

“It’s like all these little chess pieces happening in all these different hamlets around America, with the idea that perhaps this could all lead to the overthrow of the government in three years,” adds Donohue, who predicted the rise of democracy beats in a 2020 piece for *Nieman Lab*. “It’s a harder thing to marshal all the resources around; it just requires more convincing and more education and learning and hiring and shifting resources.”

Even newsrooms that don’t have eye-popping budgets or an endless staff roster can find ways to address dangers to democracy and help more people understand and participate in civil society. The *Berkshire Eagle* of Pittsfield, Massachusetts, runs “capsule reports” on local town meetings that include a rundown of the votes taken and top issues discussed from proposed borrowing initiatives to charter amendments to changes in the composition of government. The Nevada Independent has offered readers a gubernatorial “Promise Tracker” that lets them compare campaign pledges on a variety of issues — including health care, guns, and the environment — to real-life outcomes in a visually clear and concise way.

For now, when it comes to fundamental questions of democracy and its survival, “I think it would be foolish in this moment [of] crisis to put a reporter on and then in a relatively short time walk away and say, ‘Okay, that’s over,’ because I think that history belies that,” ProPublica’s Engelberg says.

“Call me up in three years and see what happens. But if there’s a bigger problem than this,” he reflects, “I hate to think of what it would be.” ■

Stephen Bannon hosts Breitbart News. ProPublica investigated how Bannon had mobilized to enlist election deniers as low-level GOP precinct officers



TO BRAND OR NOT TO BRAND

**It takes time and effort, but name recognition gives
journalists leverage in an industry that tends to reward
a predominantly white, male few**

BY JULIA CRAVEN

ILLUSTRATION BY DAN ZEDEK

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HIGH CAME FIRST: The reporting or the follow-

ers? The writing or the platform? The journalist or the brand?

It can be hard to tell. I've mulled over this contemporary paradox since veteran New York Times reporter Maggie Haberman and Taylor Lorenz, a seasoned internet culture reporter formerly at The New York Times and now at The Washington Post, got into a Twitter spat earlier in March. Their back-and-forth, which involved several industry titans and received commentary from many others, was about how much building a brand matters in our industry. Lorenz is a big proponent of them. Haberman unironically denied having one, despite having 1.7 million Twitter followers and a gig as a political analyst on CNN. (Journalism professor Elizabeth Spiers wrote a great breakdown of the ins-and-outs of the fight.)

That reporters are arguing about branding speaks to the current precariousness of journalism. Traditional funding models are falling apart. Few institutions can offer job stability. The threat of a layoff is always looming, making branding imperative to staying employed somehow, whether with another outlet or as a freelancer.

But Lorenz's definition of a brand is deceptively simple: Become your own entity. A brand provides leverage independent of an institution and shows that a journalist has a quantifiable reach. And for the last six years, our credibility has been under deliberate attack, making us vulnerable to cyber offenses like doxxing and trolling campaigns. A strong brand can serve as a defense for someone's reputation. These forces play a role in journalists feeling as though a brand is necessary — whether they want to build one or not.

Zaria Howell, the managing editor for Currently, a weather service and storytelling platform focused on climate change, has been branding herself in some way for as long as she can remember as a means of creative self-expression. But now "it feels really compulsive," she says. "All the branding doesn't come from natural creative drive. Some of it is really because it feels like that is a requirement to be successful in our field."

One advantage of social media branding, according to Howell, is that journalists can spread the news further without the hindrance of a paywall. But reexplaining information that's already been written requires extra labor, separate and distinct from the publishing process — even if it does help journalists establish autonomy while serving their communities.

A 2019 study on media branding practices found that journalists understand that building a brand is an opportunity to gain an extensive following, obtain name recognition, and network. But when it came to motivations for branding, there was a clear generational difference. Older, more experienced journalists were more willing to produce organizationally focused branding for their employers. In comparison, younger journalists were much more interested in focusing on their own brand, explains Logan Molyneux, an associate journalism professor at Temple University and lead author of the study.

"This is exactly what you see in the split between Haberman and Lorenz," says Molyneux. "You have an older journalist who has tenure, who has the unquestioned support of the institution, and a younger journalist who ends up leaving the Times because they weren't there for her when she came under attack." (Lorenz told Vanity Fair that people at The Times didn't understand her beat or take it seriously, but at The Post, she hopes to "blow it up bigger.")

"You can characterize this as ... like a 'company man,'" adds Molyneux, acknowledging that the term, though fitting, is dated. There are "people who are very interested in just working for a company and being there, and then [there are] folks who are very interested in more of an entrepreneurial spirit either because they want to, or because they feel they have to."

Of course, some well-established journalists see the value in branding. When the attention paid to digital media was ramping up around 2006, Benét Wilson, now a senior editor at The Points Guy, made an astute observation about where the industry was headed — and she realized that if she didn't adapt, her job would be at risk. So she traveled from Baltimore to attend trainings in New York and Orlando on WordPress, audio, blogging, and more. Along the way, Wilson organically developed a brand.

"I was not sitting there thinking, 'Oh gosh, I need to become a brand,'" she says. "I was writing about the commercial aviation industry, and I am a Black woman with natural hair and crazy glasses, who wears brightly colored clothes in an industry that is still white male-dominated. I couldn't hide even if I wanted to."

"I would go to events, and then one day somebody said, 'You just walk in here like you're the aviation queen.' And I laughed and didn't think anything of it," Wilson continues. "And then ... people started calling me that, so I was like, well, I guess this is my brand."

Wilson bought the domain name and secured the Twitter handle. "I adopted all of this stuff. I embraced it, and I ran with it, and I still do. I think it expanded my network," she says. "I think it gave me authority and gravitas in the industry."

Jay Rosen, a journalism professor at New York University and writer of the blog Press Think, encour-



ages his students to follow Wilson's lead. It's crucial, he says, to carve out a space on the web — like a personal website or a Twitter account — that's theirs independent of appearing in someone else's publication.

What this shift means for our work depends on whom you ask. Molyneux comments that journalists who are overly concerned with their public image might make editorial decisions differently due to that pressure, which would be the equivalent of a newsroom tailoring coverage to commercial concerns. Rosen says that it closes the gap between journalists and their audiences — for better or worse. It can introduce reporters to new sources and story ideas in the best cases. In the worst cases, it can open journalists up to extensive harassment and threats of violence. Wilson confirmed that visibility gets her scoops and that some people can cross social boundaries during interactions.

Howell is refreshingly blunt: "The people who have been in power for a long time, if I were them, I would be shaking. So many journalists are seeing the value in not having to align ourselves with a publication. Or, if we do align ourselves with a publication, being really critical about that organization's values."

That's another thing about acquiring autonomy. Younger journalists may feel more comfortable publicly holding media institutions accountable for shortcomings such as lacking pay transparency, union-busting, racism in the office, or a toxic work culture. This makes the squeamishness around personal branding from journalists of a certain age seem weird. Haberman, for example, accused Lorenz of seeking attention and implied that her younger peer is a lesser journalist because of her willingness to brand.

But reporters who have a major publication promoting and supporting their work — and whose parents also happen to be among New York's media elite — can afford to be skeptical. There are few options outside of building a recognizable brand for journalists who are just starting out, working as freelancers, or don't have a high level of name recognition. "A lot of younger journalists understand that, and they don't have this big reaction to self-promotion because it's just normal for them," says Rosen.

And neither do a lot of journalists who belong to a historically marginalized group. Howell, Wilson, and Tyler R. Tynes, a staff writer who covers sports at GQ Magazine, all say their brands sprouted spontaneously from their desire to be themselves in an industry that forces everyone, but especially Black folks, to tailor their image.

"It's a bit different when the brand comes via osmosis of what you're doing," says Tynes. "I wouldn't call anything I do a brand only because that's how I walk around my everyday life."

Perhaps this is why, despite the numerous upsides of branding, when it feels contrived — versus operating as a window to a journalist's thought process — it can be distracting from our work. This is the other side of the paradox. Without a platform, many talented journalists won't be allowed to tell stories using their authentic lens. But suppose the push to brand is driven solely by the desire to remain relevant in an industry that promises job security to a select, predominantly white, male few. In that case, valuable perspectives can be trumped by the need to survive.

It's a dilemma that, when deciding on the primacy of followers, platforms, or brands, rarely allows the journalism to come first. ■

In March, Taylor Lorenz's Twitter feud with New York Times reporter Maggie Haberman sparked an online conversation on how much journalists should brand themselves

SARAH KENIGSBURG

1977

José A. Martínez Soler is author of the new book “La prensa libre no fue un regalo” (“Freedom of the press was not a gift”), published by Marcial Pons, which tells the story of how journalists fought for freedom of the press in Spain.

1984

Derrick Z. Jackson has won a 2022 Outdoor Writers Association of America Excellence in Craft Award for his columns written for A.T. Journeys, Grist, and The Union of Concerned Scientists.

1989

Dorothy Wickenden, executive editor of The New Yorker, has won a Christopher Award for her book “The Agitators: Three Friends Who Fought for Abolition and Women’s Rights,” published by Scribner/Simon & Schuster.

1993

Sandy Tolan and his colleagues won the Overseas Press Club’s Morton Frank Award for “The Bitter Work Behind Sugar,” which took listeners deep into the sugar cane harvesting camps manned by Haitian immigrants in the Dominican Republic.

2001

Ken Armstrong, a reporter at ProPublica, and Meribah Knight, a reporter and podcast host with WPLN in Nashville, were finalists for the Feature Writing Pulitzer for “Black Children Were Jailed for a Crime That Doesn’t Exist. Almost Nothing Happened to the Adults in Charge.”

Stefanie Friedhoff, along with First Draft executive director Claire Wardle, is co-founder and co-director of the new Information Futures Lab at the Brown University School of Public Health. The Lab will combat misinformation, data deficits.

2003

David Dahl has joined The Maine Monitor, a nonprofit news site, as editor. He was previously a deputy managing editor at The Boston Globe.

2009

Hannah Allam was part of The

Washington Post team that won Pulitzer’s Public Service award for coverage of the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol.

2010

Beth Macy’s television adaptation of her book “Dopesick” won a Peabody Award “for its unflinching and humane portrayal of the United States’ struggle with opioid addiction, tracing its roots and its effects in tandem.”

2011

Joshua Prager was a Pulitzer finalist in the nonfiction writing category for his book “The Family Roe: An American Story,” published by W.W. Norton.

2012

Raquel Rutledge and her colleagues at the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel were selected as finalists for the Pulitzer’s Public Service award for “Wires and Fires,” a series which exposed a rash of electrical fires in the city’s rental properties and a widespread lack of accountability.

2014

Hasit Shah is the new senior staff editor in The New York Times’ London newsroom. He most recently served as a news editor at Quartz.

2015

Gabe Bullard, has joined “Here and Now” as managing producer. He most recently worked as deputy news director for audio at WAMU 88.5 in Washington, D.C.

Farnaz Fassihi is now the United Nations bureau chief at The New York Times, and will continue to help cover Iran.

Jason Grotto, a senior reporter for projects and investigations at Bloomberg News, and several of his colleagues have won the Deadline Club’s 2022 Mosaic Award for their work on “The Inequality Tax,” which examined New York City’s complex property tax system and how it perpetuates racism.

2016

Paul McNally, co-founder and CEO of the podcast company Volume, has started “Alibi Investigations,” an investigative unit, podcast, and training center that focuses on assassination reporting in Africa. Through its Alibi Institute, the new nonprofit mentors and funds journalists across the continent to produce assassination

reporting in a safe and secure way.

Wonbo Woo is now executive editor of the radio news program “The Takeaway,” co-produced by Public Radio International and WNYC. Woo previously served as executive producer at Wired and as a producer for “NBC Nightly News,” ABC’s “World News Tonight,” and “Nightline.”

Wendi C. Thomas, founding editor and publisher of MLK50: Justice Through Journalism, has been selected for the 2022 Freedom of the Press Local Champion Award, presented by the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press.

2018

Lisa Lerer was part of a team at The New York Times chosen as a finalist for the Breaking News Pulitzer for its “aggressive and revelatory reporting about the attack on Washington on January 6, 2021, delivered as the events were unfolding and afterwards.”

Sipho Kings, editorial director at the weekly African newspaper The Continent, has joined the advisory board of the Oxford Climate Journalism Network (OCJN).

María Ramírez, deputy managing editor of Spain’s elDiario.es, is author of the new book “El periódico” (“The Newspaper”), published by Editorial Debate on June 9. The book tells a personal story of journalism’s digital revolution in newsrooms in Spain, Italy, and the U.S.

Fabiano Maisonnave has joined The Associated Press as part of the climate team to cover the Amazon rainforest. He previously wrote about Indigenous rights, illegal mining, and other environmental crimes in the Amazon basin as a senior reporter for Folha de S.Paulo, Brazil’s biggest paper.

2019

Uli Köppen, head of the AI + Automation Lab and co-lead of the investigative data team BR Data at the German public broadcaster Bayerischer Rundfunk, has been selected for the Online News Association’s 2022 cohort of the Women’s Leadership Accelerator.

Nathan Payne joined Kaiser Health News as regional editor working from Traverse City, Michigan. He was previously executive editor of the Traverse City Record-Eagle.

Barry Sussman, Former Nieman Watchdog Editor, Dies at Age 87
A longtime Washington Post editor, Sussman led the paper’s award-winning Watergate coverage

Barry Sussman, the Washington Post editor who directed coverage of the Watergate scandal in the early 1970s, died on June 1, 2022, at his home in Rockville, Maryland. He was 87.

Sussman oversaw the work of Post reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein that ultimately resulted in the political fallout that led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon in 1974. The Post’s coverage received the 1973 Pulitzer Prize for public service. It was also dramatized in “All the President’s Men,” the 1976 movie based on Woodward and Bernstein’s book of the same name, but the film — and popular culture — overlooked Sussman’s important contributions to the Watergate investigation.

From 2003-2012, he served as editor of the Nieman Watchdog Project, created to promote watchdog journalism in the United States and abroad and to encourage reporters and editors to monitor and hold accountable those who exert power in all aspects of public life. Its guiding tagline was “Questions the press should ask.”

Sussman’s former Nieman Watchdog colleague Dan Froomkin, now the editor of Press Watch, reflected on the impact of Sussman’s work saying: “He was a giant of journalism, one of the all-time great editors, the unsung hero of the Washington Post’s Watergate coverage. And unlike so many others, he never lost his passion for holding the powerful accountable.”

Sussman was a Washington Post editor



for 22 years, serving as city editor, special Watergate editor, Washington Post pollster, and columnist for the Post’s National Weekly edition. In 1981, he co-founded the Washington Post/ABC News poll, which he managed for the next six years.

After leaving the Post in 1987, Sussman served briefly as the managing editor of national news for United Press International. He additionally worked as an international news media consultant with assignments at newspapers in Spain, Portugal and in seven Latin American countries.

He was the author of three books. The first, “The Great Coverup: Nixon and the Scandal of Watergate” (Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1974), was named one of the best books of the year by The New York Times. His other books are “What Americans Really Think” (Pantheon, 1988),

which covered public opinion and politics, and “Maverick: A Life in Politics” (Little, Brown and Company, 1995), which was co-written with Lowell P. Weicker, Jr., former U.S. senator and governor of Connecticut.

Sussman was born in Brooklyn, New York, on July 10, 1934. In 1956, he graduated with a bachelor’s degree in English and history from Brooklyn College, where he worked as an editor and columnist on a school newspaper. After working at a New York advertising agency and moonlighting as a movie reviewer, he joined the Bristol Herald Courier in Bristol, Virginia, and worked his way up to become managing editor before moving to the Post in 1965.

He is survived by his wife Peggy (Earhart) Sussman, two daughters, Seena Sussman Gudelsky and Shari Sussman Golob, and four grandchildren. ■

John D. Sutter and his colleagues at CNN won second place for a documentary series in the NPPA Best of Photojournalism contest. The team’s series explores how climate change impacts our daily lives.

2020

Wendy Lu has joined The New York Times as a senior staff editor on the Flexible Editing desk. She was previously a staff editor and producer at HuffPost reporting on the intersection of disability, politics, and culture.

Rob Chaney has been named managing editor of the Missoulian in Missoula, Montana. After joining the paper as a

staff reporter in 1997, he covered local government, business, law enforcement, and public education before becoming the science and outdoors writer.

Jasmine Brown, a senior producer in the race and culture unit at “ABC World News Tonight with David Muir,” has been selected as a 2022 Maynard 200 Fellow by the Robert C. Maynard Institute for Journalism Education.

2021

S. Mitra Kalita, curator of the Epicenter-NYC newsletter and co-founder of URL Media, has won the News Leaders Association’s 2022 News

Leader of the Year Award.

Anjali Sastry Krbechek is joining LAist Studios, part of Southern California Public Radio, as a senior producer, overseeing the WILD and Snooze podcast teams and creating a new podcast. She was previously an audio producer for the NPR podcast “It’s Been a Minute with Sam Sanders.”

Scott Dance has spent the past nine months working on his Baltimore Sun series “Climate Change: Ready or Not.” He covered responses to storms, flooding and heat, and the ways communities are preparing for extreme weather. ■

Meet the 2023 Nieman Fellows



Fahim Abed, a former local reporter for The New York Times in Kabul, Afghanistan, who was evacuated from the country after the Taliban

takeover in 2021, will study migration and American history with a focus on Asian migrants to the U.S. and the integration challenges they face.



Adefemi Akinsanya, an international correspondent and anchor at Arise News in Lagos, Nigeria, will study how deteriorating media freedom in

her country is connected to the #EndSARS protests against police brutality. She will also work on building a news management platform to expand journalism jobs and help reporters tell stories of the marginalized.



Dotun Akintoye, a staff writer at ESPN, will research the war on terror and the relationship between political violence and sports, examining such events as the

1972 Munich Games, the 1996 Atlanta Games, the 2008 Sri Lankan Marathon, and the 2013 Boston Marathon.



Sheikh Sabiha Alam, a senior reporter who covers crime and other stories for the daily Prothom Alo newspaper in Bangladesh, will study human rights atrocities and forced migration.



Amanda Becker, Washington correspondent for The 19th, a nonprofit newsroom reporting on gender, politics, and policy, will

study the news habits of women to understand gender differences and susceptibility to misinformation and participation in antidemocratic movements.



Deborah Berry, a national correspondent for USA Today covering civil rights, voting rights, and politics, will study the

pivotal role African American women have played in local and national politics from the civil rights movement to the Black Lives Matter movement, with a focus on voter registration and the pursuit of elected office.



Olga Churakova, a Moscow-based independent journalist and host of the podcast “Hi, You’re a Foreign Agent,” will study the predicament of individual journalists

maligned as foreign agents or public enemies by governments attempting to restrict their funding, reporting, and impact.



Ashish Dikshit, editor of BBC News Marathi in New Delhi, will study methods for effectively diversifying newsrooms in the country to be more

inclusive of caste, religion, gender and sexuality, as well as ways to enhance coverage of underprivileged communities.



Pinar Ersoy, editorial lead for BBC Monitoring’s team in Istanbul, will examine successful newsroom innovation and transformation to identify solutions that can enhance quality journalism globally.



Darryl Fears, a staff writer who covers climate and environmental justice for The Washington Post, will study urban planning and public health to determine how historic federal

and local zoning of industrial pollution sites intersects with poor health outcomes in communities of color.



Danny Fenster, editor-at-large for Frontier Myanmar, an investigative news magazine, will study how journalists in exile are using emerging digital tools to

continue reporting on repressive regimes, as well as the impact of Western foreign policy responses to these governments on reporters’ ability to continue working. Fenster was imprisoned by Myanmar’s junta for nearly six months in 2021 for his reporting on military-linked businesses.



Elisabeth Goodridge, the deputy travel editor for The New York Times, will reimagine travel writing and reporting that is

responsive to the environmental and societal effects of travel on the warming planet.



Angie Drobnic Holan, the editor-in-chief of the Poynter Institute’s Pulitzer Prize-winning fact-checking website PolitiFact, will study whether journalism can

have a causal effect on the preservation of democracy and, if so, how.



Renée Kaplan, head of digital editorial development at the Financial Times in London, will examine a new model of decentralized journalism focused on serving the

needs of future audiences that are more diverse, technologically savvy, content-deluged, and institutionally independent.



Natasha Khan, an Asia correspondent for The Wall Street Journal based in Hong Kong, will study the acceleration of global inequality during the pandemic and how media

organizations can advance coverage of stories from developing regions.



Tanya Kozyreva, an investigative reporter based in Kyiv, Ukraine, will identify the U.S. regulatory shortfalls that allow criminals to use cryptocurrencies to conceal and launder billions of dollars, as well as the

impact of these crimes on working people in the U.S. and overseas.



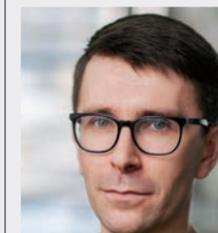
Romy Neumark, creator and host of the daily television program “Night News” and host of a radio program at Kan, the Israeli Public

Broadcasting Corporation, will work on developing a large-scale training program for journalists that emphasizes professional newsroom culture and inclusion.



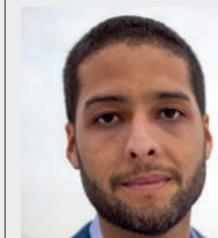
Bopha Phorn, a journalist based in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, will research how independent media organizations operating under

oppressive regimes can collaborate to share information and resources to protect each other and elevate important stories.



Taras Prokopyshyn, publisher and CEO of The Ukrainians Media in Lviv, Ukraine, will study how to build sustainable independent media

companies that provide high-quality journalism in developing countries.



Kristofer Ríos, a director, multimedia journalist and producer with Muck Media, will study U.S. media coverage of immigration and

the role of empathy in news reporting. He will create a framework of standards and practices for reporting on traditionally marginalized communities.



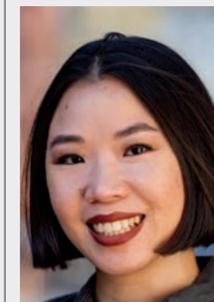
Moises Saman, a Spanish-American photojournalist and a member of Magnum Photos, plans to explore how the visual documentation of

armed conflict is consumed, interpreted and, with the use of new technologies, manipulated to shape narratives.



Alex Smith, a health care reporter for the Kansas City NPR station KCUR and a national NPR-Kaiser Health News reporting partner, will study how journalists can

effectively address health misinformation without causing it to spread further.



Ruth Tam, co-host of the podcast “Dish City” and a digital editor at WAMU in Washington, D.C., will study how personal identity shapes journalism and research the rise of first-person writing, personal branding, and

audience interest in the background of those who deliver the news.



Jorge Valencia, the Mexico City-based Latin America correspondent for The World, will study narrative portrayals of migrants, with a focus on how news organizations can

better represent them.

VISITING FELLOW



Rebecca Richman Cohen will spend three months as a Nieman Visiting Fellow. A documentary filmmaker, founder of Racing Horse Productions, and lecturer at Harvard Law School, she

will look at the crisis of mass incarceration from various social science perspectives. ■

Channeling a Childhood Passion into a Journalism Career

How drawing maps — and a pitstop in urban planning — ultimately led to working on data visualization projects

BY REUBEN FISCHER-BAUM

When I was a little kid, there was a game I used to play for hours and hours. To my parents and siblings, it looked like I was wandering around our front yard in Maine, muttering to myself, but I was actually building an elaborate fantasy world in my head. A drainage ditch by the side of the road was a river, a cradle of an ancient civilization. An old well covering was a city under siege. Then, all the sudden, I'd sprint inside and use bright markers to draw maps of everything I'd imagined.

I drew hundreds of these maps. My favorite books had maps on the very first page: “The Phantom Tollbooth,” “Swallows and Amazons,” “The Voyage of the Dawn Treader.” I'd spend car trips in the backseat flipping through our road gazetteer. We were a backpacking family, and I'd pour over our topographic maps.

Like many other journalists, I came into our industry sideways. In college, I learned how to make maps using a computer software called GIS, and my first job out of school was in urban planning. On my first day, my boss handed me a stack of data visualization books and told me I'd be making all the charts for our quarterly reports. That maybe sounds awful. But it turns out I loved it, a lot more than the urban planning part.

On the side, I started a personal sports blog and began to stay up late making weird little maps and charts. This ended



I love making stuff, and I'm very lucky because I get to do it for work



As a child, Fischer-Baum was fascinated by maps — an interest that led to his role as graphics editor at The Washington Post

up landing me my first job in journalism, at the site Deadspin.

During those years at Deadspin, I was a sponge. I learned how to report, how to write, how to come up with story ideas, how to be a better designer. (My color choices were often horrible.) I saw the work that outlets like The New York Times were making — projects like “Snow Fall” — and I started teaching myself how to code.

Then suddenly, I had my first hit. I looked through public salary databases and found that the highest-paid employee in most states was the head football or basketball coach at the largest public

university. I put these findings on a map — what else? — and it took the internet by storm. I felt like I'd really done something, and I knew I was going to stick with journalism.

After Deadspin, I jumped to FiveThirtyEight, and eventually to The Washington Post, where I became an editor on the graphics desk. I was still learning, but during the past few years, I felt the joy I got from my job begin to slip away. The news became all emergencies, all the time. I started to have a mantra that if I could just get through today, tomorrow would be less intense. Which turned into “if I can just get through this week,” then “if I can just get through this month,” and finally “if I can just get through this year.”

By the time we were deep into Covid-19, I was burnt out. I started to have trouble reading the news. I had to look at paragraphs over and over before I could absorb them, and it became especially hard for me to dig into the visual stories — the sort of work that I edited and had brought me into journalism in the first place.

In all of 2020, there was only one idea that really cut through my burnout. The Washington Post has a section called KidsPost. I pitched them on a project to compile photos of newspapers that children were making at home during Covid and build a fancy website for them. We did it, and the headlines popped off the page. “Hard work for juicy berries,” reported The Daily Excitement Worldwide, in bright green colored pencil. “Does your favorite chocolate have slavery?” asked the MG Tattler, in a font size usually reserved for the start of world wars.

This project did not take the internet by storm. But I loved it, because within these newspapers, I recognized the joy I felt when I was just a kid running around my yard. And I recognized the excitement I felt when I was just becoming a journalist and learning something new every day.

During my Nieman year, I sought out people and projects that would let me recapture this excitement and joy. I learned how to build electronics from scratch. I made some weird digital art with the webcam. I love making stuff, and I'm very lucky because I get to do it for work. But here's what I now understand: If I only make stuff for work, I might learn to hate it, and I don't want to hate it. I need to find the space to continue to make some stuff just for me. ■



“Still, it's nice to just get away.”

AFTERIMAGE

“A Cartoon Creates Its Own Little World”

New Yorker cartoonist Christopher Weyant, NF '16, on capturing the dive into post-pandemic life

Perhaps the only thing less entertaining than watching someone write a cartoon idea is a cartoonist describing that process to you. It's not pretty. Much of the time is spent drinking coffee. The rest is spent motionlessly staring at a blank piece of paper, zombie-like, hoping some small bit of truth eventually finds its way to the end of my pen. In my head, I free associate about world events, cultural shifts, and human foibles until an idea forms that is personal enough to reveal a little about the artist but universal enough to connect to the readers. To me, the process feels a bit like seeing a psychiatrist who uses nitrous oxide. It's uncomfortable and exposing at times, but you often come out smiling in the end.

One of my goals as a cartoonist is to write an ‘evergreen’ — a cartoon that creates its own little world that will resonate with readers years after it was published. As a political cartoonist, I also try

to add an extra layer if possible, writing a cartoon that addresses a topical news event while remaining ‘evergreen.’ If successful, it can be enjoyed as a present-day commentary on a specific event and, in years to come, be appreciated in a different way, without that context, as humorous cartoon unto itself.

With the worst of the pandemic behind us, it was time to begin to emerge socially. Desperate to see our friends and family or just feel ‘normal’ again, many of us took small steps and ventured back out into the world. A walk in the park. An extra trip to the store. A distanced drink with friends in the frigid, winter air.

The exposure felt dangerous, and we knew it could possibly be life-threatening, even with all of the vaccinated, masked, distanced precautions we took. But we knew it was time. Like those fish, we held our breath and, even for a moment, it was worth it to just get away. ■



**“PUBLIC OFFICE
HAS BECOME
A CONDUIT FOR
PRIVATE GAIN”**

EMMANUEL DOGBEVI
MANAGING EDITOR OF
GHANA BUSINESS NEWS