We do our job while we can. When it becomes impossible, we'll think about something else.

ROMAN ANIN

Stories
Contributors

Catherine Buni is an award-winning freelance writer and Type Investigations reporter covering online content moderation, risk, and security. Her articles, essays, and stories have appeared in The Atlantic.com, The Common, The Los Angeles Review of Books, Orion, The Verge, and others.

Jim Friedlich is executive director and CEO of The Lenfest Institute for Journalism, the non-profit owner of The Philadelphia Inquirer, co-founder of Spotlight PA, and supporter of sustainable solutions for local news nationwide. He is a former executive of The Wall Street Journal.

Tracie Powell is the founder of The Pivot Fund and the founding fund manager of the Racial Equity in Journalism Fund. She was a 2021-22 fellow at The Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School and a 2015-16 JSK Fellow at Stanford.

Laura N. Pérez Sánchez is an independent investigative reporter and editor based in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Laura writes about corruption and its impact on the population, post-disaster recovery efforts, and lived experiences under colonialism. She’s a 2019 Nieman Fellow, and her work has appeared in The New York Times, National Geographic, Centro de Periodismo Investigativo, El Nuevo Día, and independent multimedia projects.

Stephen Greenhouse was a New York Times reporter for 32 years, covering labor and workplace matters from 1995 to 2014. He also served as the Times’ business correspondent in Chicago, as its European economics correspondent in Paris, and as an economics and then diplomatic correspondent in Washington. He is the author of “Beatenn Down, Worked Up: The Past, Present, and Future of American Labor,” published in 2020 by Knopf.

Marigo Farr is a climate and equity reporter with 10 years of expertise in the non-profit sector, where she worked on policy in environmental and food justice, housing, municipal budgets, and healthcare. She is currently a graduate student in journalism at Northeastern University and formerly a Climate Solutions Fellow at Grist.

Celeste Katz Marston has spent 25 years reporting for newspapers, magazines, and radio with a speciality in politics, elections, and voting rights, and has been on staff at outlets including the New York Daily News, Newsweek, and WRAI New York. She is the co-author of “Is This Any Way To Vote? Vulnerable Voting Machines and the Mysterious Industry Behind Them” (WhoWhatWhy, 2020).

Journals like Samiullah Mahdi, editor-in-chief of the Afghan outlet Amu TV, have continued critical reporting outside their home countries.

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Public funding at the state level has helped bolster local community outlets
archon Fung is the Winthrop Professor in the Harvard School of Public Health, a co-founder of the Transparency Institute, and a co-founder of the Center for Democratic Governance and Transparency Policy Project at HKS's Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation. He has written several books, including "Full Disclosure: The Perils of Promise of Transparency" and "Empowered Participation: Reinventing Urban Democracy."

Professor Fung spoke to Nieman Fellows in February about partisanship, mistrust, and the media's role in democracy. Edited excerpts:

**On how and why mistrust forms**

We seldom have direct access to the truth. The only way that we know whether these claims about climate change are true is whether we trust helping us to find out. There are many, many pieces of disagreement on what is true. What is not that has this fact pattern of being highly polarized. One is, who won the election? Another one is whether climate change is happening or not, and whether it poses a significant risk. Democrats and Republicans are highly polarized about that. A third one is, how much risk it poses, how much risk it poses, how to deal with a pandemic, and how to reasonably debate about different perspectives about how to deal with the pandemic.

**An important strategy for a democratic society is for everyone to become more responsible participants**

I think an even deeper problem than partisan polarization about truth is partisan polarization about the institutions that we used to rely upon to tell us what is true. About 30 percent of Republicans have a great deal of trust in the media, whatever that means to them. About 30 percent of Democrats have a great deal of trust in the media, whatever that means to them. It is very, very polarized, but the levels for both are pretty low.

Somewhat more surprising to you, maybe, that hits close to home for me is that Americans are very, very polarized about whether colleges and universities have a net beneficial effect on the country. Right now, a little bit more than 30 percent of Republican identifiers think that colleges and universities — higher ed — has a net positive effect on the country at all scale. Whereas, Democrats double that. High-ness think that colleges and universities have a net positive effect.

There is another important truth-generating institution in our society is science. Republicans and Democrats are very skeptical on what is the sense of responsibility. There is a big lie version of that, which is that they thought they were using the science right and they didn’t think it was an airborne disease. There is a big lie version of this, which is that is they thought it might be transmitted, but they thought they couldn’t trust you not to hoard masks because first responders and frontline medical people needed them. They didn’t trust you and me to do the right thing. I’m really trying to pick a scale here and be provocative by saying part of the reason is that we have been culpable, perpetrating many more lies and so people are right to have a fair amount of skepticism about us.

**On the internet and the mass media era**

I certainly was one of the technocrats earlier on in the 90s. The technocratic part was the part that really didn’t like (the media). You guys are the gatekeepers. I was a technocrat, thinking, “These people shouldn’t be gatekeeping.” I’ve never been a fan of the press. You have a professional ethic and a set of skills that really compels you to get things right and try to understand all of these different perspectives, put it together, and tell your readers and viewers a story in which they can understand the arc of the day’s events in society.

The main effect of social media is that you guys are speaking a little bit less and all of us are speaking a little bit more. We don’t have those norms, and we don’t have that sense of responsibility. The libertarian doesn’t really have a way of thinking about, what if 90 percent of people are speaking for us out there are just irresponsible? They don’t care about truth. They care more about amplifying messages that make them feel good. They don’t care about how that harms that results from the things that they do or that they amplify. A super important strategy for a democratic society is for everyone to participate in the public sphere to become more responsible participants and more responsible citizens in the public sphere, and to become conducive to democracy?

**On the media’s role in democracy**

After World War II, in the first part of the 20th century (there) was another revolution in communication. Radio, soon to be television, a little bit later film.

Many people in Europe and the United States were absolutely persuaded, and they were probably right, that these new communication technologies were terrible for democracy, and indeed, that they’ve given rise to the fascist powers — Mussolini [were] very adept user of the new media, much like some of the popular or populist authoritarian today.

They said in Europe and in the United States, “What are we going to do? Can we bend the arc so that these super-dangerous technologies, dangerous for democracy, become conducive to democracy?”

Henry Luce, who was the owner of Time [and] Life magazine, creates this Hulse Commission. Luce thought that the commission would say, “Well, freedom of speech is the American way,” and that’s what we need to double down on, but they didn’t.

They said that it’s the job of media organizations and concentrated media in the United States, but probably also other Western societies, to do what they need to do to inform citizens so that they can be responsible citizens and support democracy rather than mislead them, or confuse them, or polarize them.

In order to do that, it’s going to cost these companies a lot of money, but it has a lot of money so that they can make a living.

Your primary responsibility, even though you’re a capitalist corporation, is to try to think of the ways that support democratic citizenship.

When the profit motive comes into play, they sometimes do the job and subordinate profits. If your best reporters write a story that’s very critical of the status quo, what you got to run the story. That’s the norm obviously violated a lot in the breach, but that was the norm and everybody understood it that way.

Where’s our Hutchins Commission? Where’s our commission that says what’s the role of the media and media platforms maximize on profit, it tends to generate these toxic effects for democracy, and these guys have to take one for democracy.

I don’t know what that would look like. I think it might look like a thousand social psychologists (at) each of these companies saying, “How can we tweak the algorithms to be good for democracy, and truth, and what’s happening there, and it’s not simply about democracy, rather than toxic, polarized conflict?” And enough people in the management suite to back those guys up. We just do not have that right now. "

"People Have Been Misled A Lot By Truth-Generating Institutions\""  
Harvard Kennedy School professor Archon Fung on partisanship, polarization, and mistrust

**“People Have Been Misled A Lot By Truth-Generating Institutions”**  
Harvard Kennedy School professor Archon Fung on partisanship, polarization, and mistrust
Supporting Quality Journalism that Connects with Local Communities

Lolly Bowean, NF ’17, works to hold space in philanthropy for marginalized communities.

In my early days as a reporter at the Chicago Tribune, in addition to covering breaking news, I was tasked with writing obituaries.

Writing one obituary in particular left an indelible impression on me. Joseph Haley was a public school teacher on the far South Side of Chicago who started the Jackie Robinson West Little League program. Yet, when I looked in our library archives, I couldn’t find a single news story about him. I was astounded that someone could be such a dynamic hero in their community but as an opportunity to see, I see it as my job to be in a place to see and listen to people whose stories we are trying to both the people we report on and to ourselves as journalists. P

At the Intersection of Journalism and Trauma

Lisa Krantz, NF ’20, is on a quest to minimize the harm journalists do to trauma survivors.

In a late October day, I sat on the floor of a temporary church building, poised to document the emotions of Sherri Pomeroy on what would have been her 5th birthday, her daughter, Annabelle Pomeroy, who was killed in a mass shooting in their church at the age of 4. It had not yet been a year since the shooting, but I had been documenting the congregation’s recovery for 14 months.

At that moment, I decided to apply for the Nieman fellowship to study the intersection of journalism and trauma — specifically the relationships between photojournalists and the people they photograph during times of sustained trauma. During my Nieman year, I decided to change paths, and a year later I quit my full-time staff photographer job at the San Antonio Express-News and arrived as a first-year doctoral student at the University of Missouri’s journalism school, 44 years after I had last been in school as a grade-earning student.

From the church shooting survivors, I heard repeatedly about their negative experiences with journalists, especially in the immediate aftermath. I began this journey to study the experiences of people on the other side of the camera, what it is like for them when the worst moments of their lives are displayed on the front pages of print publications, websites, and television news, and they may not have even known they were being photographed or filmed.

Members of the Jackie Robinson West All Stars Little League team celebrate their U.S. Little League Championship in 2014. Joseph Haley founded the program in Chicago’s South Side neighborhood.

In the same way that I went into communities looking for stories as a reporter, I’m entering regions looking for the organizations that have become reliant upon for either providing news, important training, or more. I approach this work with a deep humility and respect, focused on listening and learning.

I often tell journalists that are telling important stories that are nuanced, that challenge old stereotypes, and that push against systems of oppression, to keep at it. I see it as my job to be in a place to see that work when it becomes apparent.

I started on this path to understand what I feel hurts journalists and hurts people being photographed and reported on in traumatic situations. Nobody debates that we need to cover these stories, but we should debate, and hopefully agree, there are better ways to do it, minimizing harm to both the people we report on and to ourselves as journalists.

I began this journey to... study the experiences of people on the other side of the camera and channeling Lucille Ball

Dale Maharidge, NF ’88, researched the television pioneer for Turner Classic Movies.

In December 2020, during the heart of the pandemic shutdown, I flew to California and checked into a Sherman Oaks hotel. It was nearly empty of customers. A Pacific storm struck that night. I awakened at four in the morning and went out into a howling wind. Trees were down in the road as I drove toward Coldwater Canyon.

It was a good hour to channel the solitude of Lucille Ball at a low point in her career and life, before she found fame with “I Love Lucy.” Yet, when I looked in our library, I was astonished that someone could be such a dynamic hero in their community. P

The fifth episode of “Lucy,” the third season of the podcast The Plot Thickens, centered on Lucille Ball’s life between 1940 and 1950 and her relationship with Desi Arnaz.

I’m no longer in a newsroom, but that experience still shapes how I do my work as a program officer with the Creativity and Free Expression team at the Ford Foundation. That moment helped cement my passion for working in philanthropy.

NF ‘17, works to hold space in philanthropy for marginalized communities but as an opportunity to see, I see it as my job to be in a place to see, and experience the world from the perspective of the people we are writing about.

I was recruited for the Lucy podcast project by my Columbia Journalism School colleague Joanne Faryon, the editor and writer on contract with TCM. Joanne teaches a popular podcast class, “Shoe Leather,” at the school. I was excited to work collaboratively on a larger team assembled for the project.

One of the parts I was hired to research and script was episode five, which was about Lucy between 1940 and 1950. It was a dark time in Lucy’s life. Desi Arnaz, her husband, was cheating. He was unhappy having his wife support him. One time a valet called him “Mr. Ball.” It angered him. The couple spent very little time together.

In those days, Lucy was the “Queen of the Bs,” low-budget films. They lived on studio lots. At five in the morning, Lucy was fresh, driving south from Desilu Ranch. Desi was driving north. Tired. Headed home from Ciro’s. Their marriage took them over the mountains between Hollywood and the San Fernando Valley. The canyon road is curving. Coldwater Canyon at this hour in any era is desolate. On the drive up from the Lucy side of the mountain, the lights of the San Fernando Valley seemed very far away.

The only safe spot to park then and now is near Mulholland Drive. “So we told Ciro’s at the top of Coldwater Canyon about five-thirty,” Desi wrote in his autobiography. I got there at that exact time. I could imagine her parking. Waiting in the dark for Desi. Now rain fell. I aimed a shotgun mic at the roof of the rental. Great amb.

Was Lucy mad at Desi once again for his philandering? Rain pounded harder on the car’s roof. Was she eager to kiss him? The audio never aired in the podcast. It was cut from the script. But that’s okay.

I needed to be there that night.

The fifth episode of “Lucy,” the third season of the podcast The Plot Thickens, centered on Lucille Ball’s life between 1940 and 1950 and her relationship with Desi Arnaz.
In the face of federal inaction, state-level experiments to fund community-based outlets are expanding

by Catherine Buni
illustrations by Matt Chase
Over the last two decades, about 2,500 local news operations have closed — more than 960 of them in the last three years under additional Covid-19 pressures. Roughly 70 million people live in a news desert — defined as a community that has one or no newspaper available or a place where residents don’t have access to fact-based local news and information. Those hardest hit — the rural, poor, and communities of color — are left disproportionately cut off from quality local reporting, like coverage of their school board, for instance, or Covid-19 or other public health updates, or how the town government is spending their tax dollars.

Despite the disruption, public investment in local news remains woefully low, in the U.S. especially, where only $3.16 per person is spent on public media, most of which goes to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) to support local public television and radio stations, the affiliates that often carry NPR and PBS programming. For comparison, Germany spends more than $4.42 per capita while Botswana spends $0.86 per person.

Broad public awareness of the collapse of local news in the U.S. is likewise scarce. According to a 2019 Pew research study, 71 percent of Americans actually believe their local news outlets are “doing well financially.”

Without more public pressure to address the problem, passing meaningful policy is just that much harder. Yet, as supporters of public policy solutions recognize, and, as a 2019 Gallup/Knight study found, 86 percent of American adults believe everyone should have access to local news. Six in 10 “consider the local newspaper in their community an important symbol of civic pride,” Gallup/Knight found. But this trust is fragile, with only 29 percent of Americans surveyed saying they trust the news, placing the U.S. at the bottom of the 46 countries surveyed in 2021 by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

Given the gridlock in D.C., it’s unlikely that Congress will pass significant federal funding or meaningful reform for local journalism anytime soon. The Future of Local News Act, introduced by Democrats in May of 2021, aimed to create a 13-member panel to study the complex landscape and recommend ways Congress can act, but looks like it’s going nowhere. Likewise, the Local Journalism Sustainability Act, which would have allocated $1 billion for local journalism, died along with the Build Back Better bill. It would have supported local journalism in three key ways: by giving individuals up to a $250 tax credit for paying for
the last 15 years, “only two of the outlets are in the 171
germs, for instance.

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concludes. And only a small fraction of those dollars went
to newsrooms supporting communities of color and
economically disadvantaged areas. The Democracy
Fund estimates that of the $1.2 billion in journalism
grants disbursed between 2009 and 2015, only six per-
cent “went towards efforts serving specific racial and
ethnic groups” and only seven percent “went towards
efforts serving economically disadvantaged popula-
tions.” However, there are some organizations working
to change this. Nancy Lane, CEO of the Local Media
Association and Local Media Foundation, a nonprofit
working with some 3,500 local media operations, notes
that $2 million is spent annually on philanthropic funds —
or nearly $5.9 million — went to “programs focused on
requiring specific racial, ethnic, or LGBTQ+ communities.”

Martha Minow, author of “Saving the News: Why the
Constitution Calls for Government Action to Preserve
Freedom of Speech,” in 1979, the Postal Service Act
subsidized newspaper access nationwide. And it was
the government that issued the first transcontinental
telegraph rights in the 1860s to public lands. It also in-
stitutionalized the use of their news products. (One obvious
place to start, sources say, would be to update the Corporation
for Public Broadcasting, which is federally funded and
steadily delivers programming to households around the
country through local television and radio sta-
tions, though the money allocated to the entity in the
fiscal 2023 budget falls short of its funding request by
about $30 million.)

Yet, there is long-standing precedent for federal
support of journalism, says Harvard legal scholar Martha Minow, author of “Saving the News: Why the Constitution Calls for Government Action to Preserve Freedom of Speech.” In 1979, the Postal Service Act subsidised newspaper access nationwide. And it was the government that issued the first transcontinental telegraph rights in the 1860s to public lands. It also institutionalized the use of their news products. (One obvious place to start, sources say, would be to update the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, which is federally funded and steadily delivers programming to households around the country through local television and radio stations, though the money allocated to the entity in the fiscal 2023 budget falls short of its funding request by about $30 million.)

As California one mid-November afternoon, Christa Scharfenberg, project director for the California Local Journalism Fellowship Project, took time for a call. “It had been barely two months since Newsom had signed off on $25 million for the fellowship program at Berkeley, and Scharfenberg, who’s from the American Journalism Project, was being asked whether he could accept those criticisms either. Mahmood, who has worked as a jour-

n California, Newsroom leaders in the state, like Paulette Brown-Hinds, “means more journalists for us,” says Brown-Hinds, “it might allow us to access additional funds for training and conferences,” says Megan Kamerick, KUNM’s news director. “It could also help us add more staff. All these things are very challenging for us to fund as a small public radio station.”

If there is a long tradition of public policy in support of journalism, advocates say we must push harder on public policy strategies in response to the crisis. In the absence of a viable business model, they argue, local journalism deserves public support, whether from direct financial funding, tax assistance, “Foundation funding,” a major supplier for public service journalism, remains concentrated in the larger,

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state, New Jersey, for the cascade effect its early trial-blazing has inspired, "by raising the profile for the potential of state and federal support for local news.

**NEW JERSEY**

In 2018, legislators passed the landmark New Jersey Civic Information Bill, making New Jersey the first U.S. state to pass policy in support of local news in crisis and allocate tax dollars for news outlets. It had taken coalition activists, led by Free Press, a nonprofit advocacy organization, some four years to get there. The bill created a 16-member nonprofit consortium, called the New Jersey Civic Information Consortium, charged with distributing the public funds “with the mission,” according to Free Press, “of strengthening local journalism and boosting civic engagement in communities across the state.” The nonprofit is, in the words of Mike Rispaldi, senior director of journalism policy at Free Press, “at its finest” in the U.S.

To ensure a firewall between government and public interest, the bill requires the Civic Information Consortium to be comprised of representatives from universities, media outlets, community groups, journalists, local organizations, and students. True, Rispaldi says, it’s “ridiculous” how unlikely it is for any governing body that receives public funds can be with an interdisciplinary, inclusive 16-member nonprofit board. But the board is designed to ensure equity. The bill created the $3 million in New Jersey’s 2023 Civic Information Fund. Today, 27 local news organizations are using New Jersey’s public funds.

To be eligible, applicants are required to partner with a collaborating university and demonstrate a clear benefit to the community. Rispaldi says she could mean hiring a journalist for a specific beat, but it could also mean starting a training program for local journalists or launching an entirely new outlet. One recipient, Movement Cosecha, a national volunteer-based organization at all.

A handful of states are taking first steps to build something new and more just. In the face of free market collapse, they are asking, how does local journalism survive and better serve the public?

**Fund** “has helped us amplify the needs of the community, but also the community’s resilience” and is allowing the station to purchase a vehicle that will serve as a mobile studio. The Newark News and Story Collaborative, a nonprofit partnership between WBGX-Newark Public Radio, Free Press, and the Center for Cooperative Media, was founded in 2020 with the help of $100,000 in state funds “to dive deeper into the information needs of Newark residents, and the out.

The nonprofit has used this training to cover veterans’ housing issues and a first-generation immigrant who grew up in Atlantic City, with friends, family, colleagues, neighbors, she adds.

In these programs, residents to date have participated in its community media lab program, which trains and pays Newark residents to learn journalism and storytelling skills. The impact of this work is clear, Harley says: “Residents now identify us as a space where they can share their stories and lived experiences.”

The nonprofit Stories of Atlantic City (SOAC), a collaborative model that partners with community groups, has used its public funds to create a seven-month training course at Stockton University. The program teaches residents how to report on local government entities like the city council, the school board, and the Casino Reinvestment Development Authority. The first cohort included 17 coming from a multilingual and cross-generational group, from backgrounds in social work, health care, education, the arts, and other sectors.

**Movement Cosecha**, a national volunteer-based organization at all, has used this training to cover veterans’ housing issues and a first-generation immigrant who grew up in Atlantic City. It has organized and is providing ongoing reporting on citywide council meetings, local LGBTQ events, local food systems, access to public land, a nurse and medical technicians’ strike for better working conditions and contract, and racial justice and policing. NNDC’s Covid-19 resource guide has reached some 10,000 people, and 44 residents to date have participated in its community media lab program, which trains and pays Newark residents to learn journalism and storytelling skills. The impact of this work is clear, Harley says: “Residents now identify us as a space where they can share their stories and lived experiences.”

**Rising Tide Collaborative** (RTC), a nonprofit consortium, called the New Jersey Civic Information Consortium, charged with distributing the public funds “with the mission,” according to Free Press, “of strengthening local journalism and boosting civic engagement in communities across the state.” The nonprofit is, in the words of Mike Rispaldi, senior director of journalism policy at Free Press, “at its finest” in the U.S.

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Regardless of approach, advocates are most likely to find success, RLJ has observed, if they have broad coalition support, a lobbyist who has access to the governor’s office, a legislative co-sponsor who values bipartisanship, and a strategy that is as actionable — like a direct subsidy — as possible. Most. And, tax incentives don’t do much to help create new and more robust local news publishers that’s due to expire next summer.

Among other approaches, BLN advocates for a mix of tax incentives designed to get consumers buying subscriptions, small businesses to advertise with local outlets, and give organizations the stability to retain staff. But there are critics who observe that some forms of tax incentives, like philanthropic funding, are most likely to benefit those who already have significant resources, or not the organizations or people who need them most. And, tax incentives don’t do much to help create new news publishers that’s due to expire next summer.

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A gathering of current and prospective journalism funders and practitioners seeks to reinvent local news as civic information in service of communities

By Jim Friedlich
Illustration by Matt Chase

One year ago, Chicago Public Media announced the acquisition of The Chicago Sun-Times, a public radio station combining forces with a cherished hometown newspaper. The Chicago merger has created one of the largest nonprofit news enterprises in America, with nearly 200 journalists producing coverage that reaches one in three Chicagoans, according to CEO Matt Moog.

If Moog was the architect of the WBEZ/Sun Times combination, then MacArthur Foundation President John Palfrey was one of its principal builders. MacArthur was the lead investor in a reported $61 million effort to support the growth and sustainability of the new organization. A broad coalition included 11 funders, among them the Knight Foundation, the Pritzker Traubert Foundation, Builders Initiative, and Michael Sacks, a previous co-owner of the Sun-Times. The speed and scale with which this capital raise came together was impressive, instructive to other communities in need of local news investment, and a kind of teaching moment for our field.
In January, Palfrey and his co-host, Chalkbeat co-founder and CEO Elizabeth Green, convened a gathering of roughly two dozen current and prospective journalism funders and practitioners at a conference facility at Sunnyside Ranch, the former Annenberg estate in Rancho Mirage, California, outside of Palm Springs. While the event was unique, like Hollywood, with its focus on funds, aimed at effecting an effort to model Chicago and other encouraging local funding collaborations at much grander national scale.

The Lensfest Institute, where I am executive director and CEO, was a part of the host committee of this summit, which involved advanced planning as well as input into a draft “Roadmap for Local News,” co-authored by Green, Free Press Senior Director of Journalism Policy Mike Rapooli, and City Bureau Co-Founder and Co-executive Director Darryl Holliday. The roadmap was a work in progress — was published with an open, inclusive call for new input.

The roadmap reflects interviews with more than 50 leaders in the field to date and makes the case for big and bold action like we saw in Chicago. It is first and foremost a framing of the issues and the opportunities surrounding local news in the face of a crisis in American democracy. Subtitled “An Emergent Approach to Meeting Civic Information Needs,” the roadmap frames the challenge and opportunity less as saving local news than reinventing and revitalizing civic information in service of communities. Among its key goals and recommendations:

1. More Money: Meaningfully increase national and local philanthropic funding for local journalism/civic information.
2. Efficient Infrastructure: Leverage new and existing shared services or solutions providers serving multiple news organizations inexpensively and at scale.
3. Better Policy: Address state and federal policy that improves the economics of local news.

The purpose of the Sunnyside convening was to begin to galvanize funders, news organizations, and supporting organizations to think and act much more aggressively. As MacArthur’s Palfrey framed it, the goal was “to pair great need with great opportunity, to do something better, something different, and something meaningful.”

I arrived at Sunnyside a bit apprehensive and left quite encouraged. My apprehension was rooted in practical concerns over the prospective creation of a kind of mega-fund that might prove unwieldy, difficult to govern, or expensive in its own right. That might prove unwieldy, difficult to govern, or expensive in its own right.

The second was a parallel chart showing the decline of working journalists in America. “Democracy needs journalism, and guess what, journalism needs journalists.”

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Dear Sunnylands:

Let’s Widen the Roadmap — and Mark an Achievable Destination for Local News

BY KEN DOCTOR

awere of road metaphors. In the twenty-twenty evolution of the local press since The Great Recession, we’ve been driven down pathways, ramps, routes, shortcuts, and, unfortunately, many dead-ends. Which brings us to the metaphor of the moment: “The Roadmap for Local News.”

The newest would-be mapping of “what’s wrong with local news” was presented to leaders of major foundation funders, including MacArthur, Ford, Knight, Emerson Collective, and Democracy Fund. The group met outside Palm Springs in Rancho Mirage, at the old Sunnylands Estate. Sunnylands, the last weekend in January. Jim Friedman, chief executive officer of The Lenfest Institute for Journalism, offered a great summary of it for Nieman Reports.

Sunnylands must have been a great oxymorically named place to address the ever-dimming issue that has consumed more than a decade: the widening erosion of local news that has presented as a tableau of news deserts and ghost newspapers, their mastheads still intact, but filled with non-local content. It is wonderful to see serious funders acknowledge this “local news emergency,” though we must ask whether there should be a statute of limitations on that phrase given it’s lasted so long — the last newspaper reports on year-over-year growth go back to 2008.

Call it what we will, alarm is warranted. Finding directions on the landscape that exists today is a top priority for the many discussions unfurling in the months ahead.

That’s why we need to assess this particular roadmap. Overall, it’s well-intentioned with lots of fine sights along the way, callouts to numerous innovators, and some good ideas for much-needed new development. Rationalization of tech stacks? Check.

Better networking of mission-driven regional news sites? Check.

Building diversity and real inclusivity into the very fabric of local news, in content and in staffing? Check.

Shared services that work? Check.

Really engage with all our populations? Check.

Unfortunately, though, the manifesto that describes the mark in two essential functions of any journalistic cartography. First, it omits so many places on the map of local news, places that may be inconvenient reminders that the world — today’s or the world as we would like to envision it — is quite diverse and nuanced. Secondly, it fails to offer what any roadmap requires: a destination that is real, achievable, and satisfying.

Most strikingly to many who have read it, the report seems to strain for detours around two words that should drive this discussion — local news. And it elevates the term “civic information,” a new world populated by “practitioners, stabilizers, champions, networks and communities of practice,” over the words journalism and journalists.

We can all agree that civic information is good, and community betterment, words the roadmap doesn’t include, would be even better. But early philanthropic support for BIPAC was one thing the roadmap omits. Civic media uniquely can drive far better actionable localized civic information than was ever before possible, but that leads us to a first equation:

Civic information ≠ local news

Local news, created, vetted, and presented smartly by skilled editors, reporters, and the product people know so essential to our models, leads the way. It creates large, caring audiences — who can then benefit from civic information as never before.

In the authors’ distaste for the financially driven owners who are sucking the last dollars out of what they believe to be a dying trade, they paint a world of old and new, with the new in infant form and the old to be discarded as quickly as possible.

One problem here: Print local news ≠ hedge-fund-gutted dailies

For more than a decade, I’ve covered, analyzed, and...
and decried the destruction that financially driven companies like Alden and Gannett have done. At the same time, though, I’ve recognized that such financially driven companies make up about half of dailies in the country. Independent, civic-driven dailies, such as the Minneapolis Star-Tribune, The Seattle Times, The Philadelphia Inquirer, and The Charleston [S.C.] Post and Courier, show the life — and potential digital transformation — of many remaining formerly “print” operations. They are joined by literally hundreds of medium and small dailies, and, let no one forget, substantial weeklies, across the country serving millions of local citizens. A good number of these companies still hear their families’ names, and they speak to the pride of decades of perseverance.

Yet they are unmapped here. The roadmap makes them — and their place on the real map of the 2020s — invisible. Not to include them means throwing out the still-striving babies with the distasteful bathwater of the financially driven chains.

Then there are the larger start-up, digital-only operations that, too, got left off the roadmap. LION Publishers and the Institute for Nonprofit News count hundreds of members, most of them striving to create new local news organizations. They are a diverse lot, but too few of them got marked on the road-map and some of them have demonstrated the potential to play bigger roles in their communities’ futures.

Then there are the mission-driven organizations that are already replacing flagging dailies in their communities. They include a half-dozen aggressive, growing start-ups that are well on the way to doing that, including The Baltimore Banner, Block Club Chicago, The Colorado Sun, The Daily Memphian, the Long Beach Post, and my own Lookout Local/Lookout Santa Cruz. I’ve written about these peer companies, as we’ve met and shared best practices, and you will soon hear more about our collective plans.

What distinguishes these six — and there are more start-ups there across the country — is their intent to replace the dailies that are failing their communities. That means both taking in sufficient investment to fund newrooms of sufficient scale — enough skilled, diverse journalists who can create, day after day, go-to products that build sustainable and engaged audiences. It also means running these community-centric operations as major-news businesses — offering a high enough level of product and service to win membership/subscription, advertising, events, and other income.

“What are we there for?” we may hear from the backseat. Now is the time for a multi-year old and building through Covid-19 times, all are on track to earn a majority of their revenue from readers and advertisers.

All are mission-driven. Some are 501(c)3s. Others are for profit public benefit corporations. And that’s another key equation here: Digital news start-ups ≠ nonprofits, only.

In the orthodoxy of some who believe they are leading the nonprofit news revival movement, that above equation is infuriating and thus apparently leads to incomplete mapping.

Why? There’s a certain comfort with the seeming purity of the term nonprofit — which is understandable, but simplistic — and a major discomfort with business-building and entrepreneurial zeal that experience has shown is vital to forging new sustainable news operations.

Instead, it suggests a curious group of new world practitioners, pro-democracy advocates, funders, and government leaders join forces to ensure that civic information rapidly becomes a ubiquitous asset in every community in the United States. Many of us want to keep government leaders at arms’ length from local journalism, and for good reason — we cover those sources of power and hold them accountable. Here, too, the role of publishers, editors, and reporters (or are those the discarded terms for “media practitioners?”) vanishes from the roadmap.

Further, the document is blind to the great journalism and currently created by for-profit companies. The roadmap’s great embrace of the alternative to news term of “civic information” has also come under recent scrutiny as some of the roadmap presenters have launched the “Civic News Company” just days after the Sun-Lands conference closed.

This roadmap’s orthodoxy maps an inexplicable rigidity of faith over fact and offers a “news must be free” mantra. That dishonest charge should be (thank you, New York Times) an artifact of 1998, when Silicon Valley tech doped news companies with that creed.

Limiting access by paywall? That’s verboten here. In fact, in 2013, intelligent paywalls are beginning to allow us to get membership/subscription money from those who can and will pay — and increasingly serve those who can’t, or won’t, in other ways.

Orthodoxy should be so contrarian to journalists, who, after all, are taught to question everything. In fact, the very name of this mapping, “The Roadmap to Local News,” speaks to the problem. There is no single roadmap. You may have a roadmap — or a new product/business model — but it is just one roadmap or model, not the true path claim that journalism, by nature, can quickly pick apart.

Which leads to another equation: Successful, mission-driven news organizations ≠ mandated, free-for-all, no access restrictions operations.

The report misrepresents a fundamental reason that print newspapers served much — but not all — of the country so well for so long. It sums up the current downward spiral of many of the dailies over-simplistically: “The public goods being produced by the newspaper business model was a mix that benefitted even those who didn’t pay for it like coverage of local government, courts, and schools — being subsidized by consumer advertising for coverage of sports and entertainment and utilities.”

Subsidy is a popular word thrown about in explanation and in, in particular, true. What it fails to acknowledge is this huge point: Tens of millions of Americans actually paid for something they prized — local news.

Further, the explanation misunderstands advertiser demand then and now. Advertisers wanted news section placement, with relatively significantly less demand for sports or entertainment coverage.

Most importantly, today, advertising — anathema to too many in the news start-up trade — is in demand by locally owned small businesses aiming to reach local audiences. Such advertising not only offers an important revenue stream — but is community affirming.

In advocating for paywall-free sites, the roadmap seemed to target itself at philanthropy, and that, in and of itself, seems misguided. Why? Dollars and sense: There isn’t enough willing and able philanthropy to fund all the needed thousands of local news outlets in the United States. (A big point, too, on which I will only spend a sentence here. The local news collapse is seen across all democracies, and most of them do not have the philanthropic tradition or framework we do, necessitating greater-than-philanthropy solutions.)

An important equation:

Digital news start-ups ≠ philanthropically dependent organizations.

Philanthropy here should be a great partner — and has already been, in fits and starts. What’s needed is the new alignment of philanthropy with sensible, market-driven business building.

Philanthropy can be fundamental to success — but as early, substantial, game-changing, scale-building investment, and likely as a good supplement over time.

In the end, in the speculative business of new mapmaking, words matter. Ecosystem, a word much prized in this roadmap, is a great goal. It would be wonderful to have such “an interconnected system” that works well for our local democracies. But we don’t. It’s broken, disconnected. Creating a new one won’t be done on paper, or at conferences, but community by community, by those investing in and invested in the long-standing bedrock values of local journalism.

Most essentially, as we face faster-declining local news and the still-rising forces of modern know-nothingism, this is not a time for orthodoxy. It’s a time for an inclusive road-mapping that drives our communities forward.
It’s a familiar statistic: Approximately 2,500 local news outlets in the United States have closed in the past 20 years—a trend that has continued throughout the pandemic. But, in some of these “news deserts,” the places where papers have been hollowed out or shut down, the heartbeat of local news is holding on in a form that’s stood the test of time—local public radio. It’s cheaper. It’s familiar. And it has the support of a national network.

Yet, by and large, it hasn’t been at the forefront of the conversation about saving local news. And that’s what Thomas E. Patterson, Bradlee Professor of Government and the Press at the Harvard Kennedy School’s Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy, hopes to change. He spearheaded a study, released in January, titled “News Crisis: Can Local Public Radio Help Fill the News Gap Created by the Decline of Local Newspapers?” that involved a survey of 215 National Public Radio member stations across the country. (There are roughly 1,000 member stations in total.) The study found that most stations are well-positioned to be leading providers of local news in their communities—especially with additional funding to increase their local reporting capacity. And, with an increased digital news presence and a focus on reporting what really matters to communities, some could become the go-to, trusted source of news “in hard news” areas.

The next step is getting philanthropists to understand their critical role. Patterson talked with Nieman Reports about what that would take and articulated a vision for a healthy local news future—one that makes the absence of the newspaper on our doorsteps a little less stark. The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

What’s at stake in communities without viable local news? And how could local public radio be an antidote?

What we’ve seen over the last couple of decades is a really sharp decline in local newspapers. Some have closed their doors, others have been hollowed out. And that’s created a crisis at the local level in terms of the information that’s available. It’s not just about the quantity and quality of its news—not only on the radio side, but also on the digital side so that when you want to find out what’s happening in the schools or what the local sports teams are doing, what the local government is doing, your go-to “.com” becomes your local public radio station. They’re not there yet, but if we give them more resources, they could get there in many communities.

A recent study finds that shoring up NPR member stations with more philanthropic funding could increase community reporting capacity

BY MARIGO FARR

What are some of those interests? How do we bolster our newspapers? Interestingly, local public radio has not been a large part of that conversation. And what our study was designed to do was to see whether they should be part of that conversation and what would it take for local public radio to be a larger player, in terms of meeting communities information needs.

Why has radio been able to survive in some places when newspapers haven’t?

One thing is, it’s less expensive. It costs a lot more to do a newspaper and television than it does radio. And there’s a really wonderful network, this local public radio network, and it derives a lot of its programming nationally from NPR.

All media have lost trust, but local public radio less so than every other medium. So, it is kind of our most trusted source at the moment. It’s not like a digital startup or you’re beginning from nothing and trying to build something. Local public radio has a relatively trusted brand in the community. It’s a known commodity.

What are local public radio’s current limitations and what needs to happen to make it a robust local news source?

About 60 percent of [local public radio stations] have a news staff of 10 people or less. There’s not much muscle on the reporting side. Actually, if you look at the content of local public radio, it’s not at all local. Mostly, it’s national news or national talk coming from the central providers. So, the fundamental challenge of local public radio is to beef up these news staffs to the point where they can be substantial conveyors of local news. Currently, more than half [of the stations studied] are not well positioned (to do so).

If you think about a community’s information needs, you’ve got to be able to really cover that community in a pretty substantial way for you to become a place that people want to go to. If you have a very small staff, a new addition adds a lot to your reporting capacity. If we can boost the budgets of these local stations, the great share of that would and could go to local reporting. Who should the funding be allocated to?

To me, the priority would be those communities that are being underserved currently in terms of their local information, [where] basically the newspapers dried up or [are] drying up, and there really aren’t good substitutes. Now in some cases … there are very tiny stations in an area that doesn’t have much population, then you end up with the question, is that where you’re going to invest your money? [Or] are you going to go into some what larger communities where there’s equal need and basically the money goes further?

The public radio has shown itself to be strong providers of local news. Some of them have an owner-ship structure that kind of limits their possibilities or that kind of limits their creativity.

Your report says that “local stations cannot meet a community’s information needs” — or expand their audience — without taking the community’s interests and values more fully into account. What are some of those interests?

I think weather is a prime example. That happens to be the most sought-after single news item. [In] agricultural areas … you live and die by the weather. And then you get into a lot of communities that are very diverse. And you want your news to reflect the diversity of the community. To get local public radio to think more locally… is an important part of their being able to serve their communities better.

What needs to happen to mobilize funding for local public radio?

You look at the top 10 (corporations in the U.S. today) and who are they? It’s Mers and Google and Amazon … and many of them actually are turning out to be extraordinarily good philanthropists. But local public radio has not been high on the list. One of the challenges is to get them to understand how important local news is to the civic health of our communities. And that if they happen, I think it’s where the new money that’s needed will largely come from.

If you could wave your wand, what would local radio look and feel like in 10 years?

I don’t think we’ll ever go back to the place where there was one news organization that had nearly the whole of the community paying attention to it. I think to serve local information today, we need kind of an all-hands-on-deck model where local public radio is serving part of that community [and] maybe digital startups [or] what’s left of the newspaper is providing some of the news. But local public radio could be in that mix. Maybe even in some communities [it’s] the most important outlet in terms of the quantity and quality of its news—not only on the radio side but also on the digital side so that when you want to find out what’s happening in the schools or what the local sports teams are doing, what the local government is doing, your go-to “.com” becomes your local public radio station. They’re not there yet, but if we give them more resources, they could get there in many communities.
FORCED TO FLEE: HOW EXILED JOURNALISTS HOLD THE POWERFUL TO ACCOUNT

As press freedoms around the globe erode, journalists are building networks outside their home countries to continue reporting

BY CELESTE KATZ MARSTON
When Gloria Chan talks about the work of Green Bean Media, the Hong Kong-focused exile news site she helped found last year in the United Kingdom, she is crisply matter of fact.

“We are not doing something that special. ... We just want to produce [the kind of] programs that we [did] in the past,” says Chan, who teamed up with other members of the diaspora to launch Green Bean against the backdrop of China’s suppression of the free Hong Kong press, including “national security” legislation to stifle dissent.

With stories about state censorship of books and films, immigration, and culture, “We are not really doing something ‘wow’ ... [but] no one in Hong Kong can do it,” Chan adds “This is a problem.”

The lack of independent newsrooms unfettered by censorship, harassment, and death threats is a big problem — and it’s one that’s spread around the world. Since 1993, more than 900 journalists have been murdered, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists — the vast majority of those with complete impunity for the killers. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) cited a record 28 countries as having “very bad” press freedom violations in 2022, with 42 classified as “difficult,” 62 as “problematic,” and just eight as “good.”

Under these conditions, reporters leave home out of fear for their lives or those of their families and friends. Some escape after imprisonment, torture, or sham trials. Threats come from all sides — totalitarian governments, brutal military regimes, targeted violence from gangs, and thuggish oligarchs.

Confronted with the obstacles of refugee life, some regretfully lay down their cameras and close their laptops. “We need to be able to provide a place for journalists where they can resume their journalistic activities. [Being] abroad is one thing, but being abroad and not continuing journalism is a problem for all of them,” says RSF Editor-in-Chief Pauline Adès-Mével. “We always try to support as long as possible journalism in the country, and it’s not for us the best solution, ever, to have all these people leave. [But] sometimes, there is no choice.”

There have been growing reasons for the necessity of exile journalism. As the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance noted in a study of the global state of democracy in 2022, “Over the past six years, the number of countries moving toward authoritarianism is more than double the number moving toward democracy.” Repression was significantly on the rise in non-democracies, and even in places where democracy was the prevailing system, there had been stagnation or erosion — all of this fueled in part by forces from war to pandemic to economic uncertainty. Dictators and criminal enterprises see a free press as an existential threat, and seek to discredit, diminish, or destroy its work — and reporters themselves.

Some reporters, like Zahra Joya, find ways to soldier on from afar: A child when the Taliban took over her...
Eritrea, founded in 2017, says that when Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, “it [became] clear that being a journalist, especially in exile, is also an activist.”

Under these circumstances, journalists around the globe are continuing their work against the greatest odds. But as The Washington Post’s Jason Rezaian, who spent 544 days imprisoned in Iran, points out, they do have a unique edge. “What they do have is a connective tissue to things that are happening back in Iran or Afghanistan or whatever country that they come from that we don’t have — that [we] can’t replicate,” he says. “Without people like that, [we] wouldn’t have a real good understanding of any of the conflicts or the trouble spots around the world that matter so much.”


Radio Tamazuj is an exile outlet covering South Sudan with employees scattered across Africa, was first to name the arrested journalists in its coverage of the incident, according to the station. It’s easy to understand why other outlets may have been more cautious about reporting on the slayings of dozens of church leaders. When other South Sudanese outlets think a story’s too hot to handle, they’ll send it to Tamazuj. People living in the country typically are not persecuted for listening to Tamazuj, but, on the other hand, “Radio Tamazuj is an independent media that can inform people, can create a platform for citizens to participate in public discourse.”
It’s been a turbulent road for Aung Zaw — and a long one. 2023 marks 30 years since he started covering his native Myanmar (which is also known as Burma) via The Irrawaddy, a magazine named for the country’s greatest river. “I look back and I say, ‘Wow. We survived,’” he says. “You know, we started with a very humble, humble beginning.”

Zaw started the outlet with “maybe a few thousand baht” in Bangkok, Thailand, after being imprisoned and tortured in Myanmar for pro-democracy activities. Irrawaddy, which provides news in both English and Burmese, was first produced at a local copy shop and snail-mailed. The digital English version launched in 2000, and the Burmese version launched the next year.

The survival of The Irrawaddy is directly linked to the survival of its staff inside and outside Myanmar. RSF ranks the country at 176 of 180 in press freedom and says the head of the junta “openly promotes a policy of terror towards journalists” who don’t parrot the official line and regularly use imprisonment and torture to maintain control of the narrative. The Irrawaddy’s staff has moved from Zoom staff meetings to Signal calls out of security concerns. Staffers get training on digital safety — carrying a “clean” personal phone separate from a “dirty” work phone in case of derangement; constantly changing SIM cards to avoid tracking; exercising caution about not only sources, but also neighbors and surroundings, even in exile.

When the country opened up (somewhat) in 2012, some staffers stayed in Thailand and others returned to Myanmar. “We went back to Burma and slowly started testing [a] one foot in, one foot out strategy,” says Zaw, who won the 2014 CPJ International Press Freedom Award. The relative freedom didn’t last: February 2022 brought a military coup — and plunged the nation back into profoundly hostile territory for journalists. Zaw had to leave again.

Today, The Irrawaddy pursues accountability reporting — including ongoing “junta crony” corruption coverage — with funding from international philanthropy and NGOs. The magazine has detailed how former generals, relatives, and pals of junta leader Min Aung Hlaing have been appointed to top ministerial roles, and how the junta “permitted the US-sanctioned Htoo Group, owned by arms dealer Thawt Thawt, to import over US$5.4 million worth of palm oil per month.”

There have been ups and downs. Donor fatigue has been an issue. Consultants might eye a paywall to generate cash, but “you want your country to be free, to be [d]emocratic… you have a mission,” he says.

Working with a hybrid exile/in-country staff has other complications, including pilfering, the loss of trust, and protection of non-editorial staff, like drivers and accountants who can be targeted because they know where other staffers live. To protect people, The Irrawaddy has turned to b Undying and a centuries-old money transfer system that relies on trusted agents in multiple countries and leaves a minimal paper trail. “You cannot use the bank, [because] they follow the money,” Zaw says. “They [want] to know who are the donors, who are the funders, who are the investors. They are suspicious of everything foreign. And you cannot be accused of high treason if you receive money from abroad.”

Zaw, along the Thai-Myanmar border, “We have more freedom [to talk to] rebels and insurgents, or [business] people.” While operating fully inside Burma isn’t currently possible, Zaw says he just couldn’t cover the country the same way from Europe or the U.S.

Removed, but not too far, The Irrawaddy still has measures of both access and freedom. “In spite of odds and crisis, I stick around because this is the best place to operate,” he adds. “You can get the real story from here.”

When Amu TV launched as a new exile outlet covering Afghanistan in August 2021, staff took their best guesses as to how many Twitter followers they might hope to rack up in a day.

“One of the colleagues said, ‘If we have 1,000, that would be a great achievement.’ I said yes — but to myself, I was saying, ‘Even if we get 500, that would be good,’” recalls Samiullah Mahdi, co-founder and editor-in-chief. Today, Mahdi works from Amu headquarters near Washington, D.C.; Najafizada is in Toronto. The total staff of about 40 is split 50-50 inside and outside of Afghanistan.

Amu TV launched with a multi-phase plan. Get established first with digital, build a studio in the U.S., and eventually move to satellite. (“TV is the number one medium in Afghanistan to access the people around the country,” says Mahdi.) Today, Mahdi works from Amu headquarters near Washington, D.C.; Najafizada is in Toronto. The total staff of about 40 is split 50-50 inside and outside of Afghanistan and presents the news in English, Pashto, and Farsi.

About 75 percent of Amu’s audience is inside Afghanistan. It has pulled in more than 60,000 Twitter followers, 139,000 on Facebook, and around 300,000 on YouTube. It relies heavily on social media to develop reach.

Mahdi says “having access to real information, real people inside the country” through correspondents and...
informants is key. So is pairing that with an external team of editors “who are not influenced [by] the Taliban threatening their lives.” It’s especially evident on sensitive stories like Amu’s coverage of rape and civilian killings. Last year, Amu spoke to local Taliban officials and residents of Panjshir Province who confirmed details of a violent case in which a woman and her four daughters — the girls were ages 10 to 18 — were beaten and raped by Taliban members. And Amu has set up a private internet portal where in-country correspondents can share information with Western-based editors. While Amu encourages reporters to remember “no story deserves [losing] your life,” the hybrid model allows the outlet to pursue stories “local media are not able to tackle anymore,” he says.

Amu TV, largely funded by NGOs, is also betting on some of the boldness names are recruited. Among these are News Manager Ana Shabed, an award-winning human rights reporter whom Mahdi calls a role model for the next generation of journalists, especially for young women trying to break into the business. There’s also Karim Amini, who appeared on Afghan screens for a decade as a field reporter and host, and Mujeeb Arez, who have worked as a journalist with Onda Local since 2000 as a project of the Centro de Investigaciones de la Comunicación under journalists Chamorro and Patricia Orozco, has struggled to keep informing Nicaraguans in the face of censorship — including getting suspended three times. “The ambition of the regime is to control everything that’s said,” Mendoza says. “But so far we have been able, through social media, through YouTube, through websites, to continue to supply reporting that can be seen inside Nicaragua.”

A criminal group menaced him for supposedly working with a rival crew. When Cuevas reported the threats to the government, they offered relocation under the country’s human rights program. He held out as long as he could before accepting. “As journalists, what we must want to depend on is what we [can] see with our own eyes,” he says.

Now in Mexico City, “I can’t do any field work,” he says. “If I want to go to visit the families, I need to request a permit.” To report from afar — much as in the case of exile outlets that leave their countries entirely — he has colleagues on the ground make photos and videos, asking them to get him phone numbers so he can interview the subjects directly as needed. In other cases, he gives his co-workers lines of questioning to further the reporting in areas he himself cannot enter. To fill in the investigatory gaps created by distance, Cuevas can also turn to online tools, such as the “national platform of transparency,” which gives access to Mexico’s public records.

Exile, even within Mexico, has exacted a financial toll on API Guerrero, Cuevas says. Some of the clients of his news service became targets of threats and pulled back from business dealings with the agency, leaving a hole in the budget. While API retains about 10 collaborators within Mexico has been labeled RSF’s deadliest country for journalists three years in a row. More than 150 journalists have been killed in the last three years, when Jonathan Cuevas first went into the news business. A decade later, he and his wife started what is now the Agency of Investigative Journalism (API) as a regional news service in his home state of Guerrero. API began to collect and investigate denunciations — complaints — from the people of Guerrero in three areas: opacity in the use of government resources, public employees abusing their positions, and links between government officials and organized crime. These investigations went over poorly with both the government and the gangs.

First came harassment through social media, followed by threats. “They put [our] messages saying that we had criminal records as domestic abusers of women,” Cuevas says. “[They] were trying to damage our public reputation so people would no longer believe what we were saying.”

A friend along passed warning: Organized crime wanted API to stop looking into the president, or else Cuevas would be accused of mob ties. He was threatened with death and dismemberment. He was followed.

A criminal group menaced him for supposedly working with a rival crew. When Cuevas reported the threats to the government, they offered relocation under the country’s human rights program. He held out as long as he could before accepting. “As journalists, what we must want to depend on is what we [can] see with our own eyes,” he says.
“In Belarus, we have no influence on the government. But here in Europe, the government and officials react”

Ales Yarashevich, Belarusian Investigative Center

Les Yarashevich of the Belarusian Investigative Center has been working in exile since the summer of 2021, amid the arrest of journalists under Lukashenko’s press crackdown. RSF reports that until Russia invaded Ukraine, Belarus was considered one of the most dangerous countries in Europe for journalists and was ranked 135 of 180 in press freedom by the organization. “The Belarusian authorities systematically target journalists, who can be exiled, arrested, sometimes assaulted and even treated in prison,” RSF writes. Conditions for working press have worsened since 2020, when Lukashenko won re-election for a sixth term in a vote denounced as unfair, according to the website. While Yarashevich says BIC writes for a Belarusian audience, “it’s hard to change things at home under the rule of Lukashenko, who has been in power since 1994. Where BIC has seen results, he says, is outside the country.

IStories

When Roman Anin started Important Stories, or ISTORIES, in 2020, “we didn’t even consider ourselves as a media outlet,” he says. The original idea was to “publish in-depth investigations and reports every week, and share them with major media outlets, we use our information on all our energy in these two platforms, and we started making more videos — even though we are not TV reporters,” Anin explains. It worked. Some of the videos went viral — including questioning for covering anti-government protests. More journalists have been murdered in Russia than anywhere else in Europe over the past 20 years, per RSF, and outlets that question the regime have been forced to shutter or relocate abroad. Anin left Russia in May 2021, and his team eventually followed. “They’re now based in Prague, where Czech authorities have given special consideration to exiled journalists from Russia.”

But with Russian President Vladimir Putin’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, “Now we are not an investigative media outlet that publishes once a week, but a daily media outlet that is covering war on a daily basis,” he says. “We have reporters in Ukraine, we have freelance reporters in Russia, we have investigators in various countries, so we’re becoming bigger and bigger, and the audience is growing.”

In May of 2022, ISTORIES had 184,000 followers on YouTube, less than a year later, that number had increased to 332,000. “Now, we really think that our mission as Russian journalists is to let people in Russia know the truth about the war, because people are getting information [from the] propaganda,” the Kremlin spurs to control the narrative while it blocks as many independent news outlets as possible.

Blacked in Russia at the outset of the war, Stories had to get creative. “We asked ourselves, ‘What are the platforms that are still available in Russia?’” The answer was YouTube and Telegram. “We can use both information on all our energy in these two platforms, and we started making more videos — even though we are not TV reporters,” Anin explains. It worked. Some of the videos went viral — including

one about the families of slain soldiers from the Siberian region of Buryatia, which was viewed by nearly seven million people. Another spotlighting the business dealings of Putin’s family via leaked documents drew more than 3.5 million views.

“How many people are on the ISTORIES team now, exactly?” Anin won’t say.

“We are [an] ‘undesirable organization,’” a blacklist label under Russian law that opens up Stiffs to criminal prosecution. “But admitting the fact that we head ISTORIES, I can be sentenced to [six] years of prison. All my reporters [can] be sentenced to four years,” he says. “And any reader who reposts our stories can be sentenced to four years.”

Anin says ISTORIES pays dearly for Google storage to maintain a mirror website “reachable in Russia without VPN,” he says, but the traffic just doesn’t compare to their Telegram and YouTube audiences.

It accepts donations by credit card, Google Pay, crypto, and YouTube sponsorship, but refuses help from inside Russia, “primarily to ensure the safety of the donors themselves,” according to the website.

Anin doesn’t think he can return to a Russia ruled by Putin, and he’s not sure how ISTORIES will evolve next — or even how long it will last.

“Maybe next year, Russia will shut down the internet...it’ll become impossible to reach the audience in the country... We have no idea. We think only about tomorrow,” he says. “We do our job while we can. When it becomes impossible, we’ll think about something else.”

Jonathan Cuesav, co-founder of the Agency of Investigative Journalism, joins the symbolic closing of the attorney general’s office to protest the murder of 19 Mexican journalists, Aug. 2022. Over 150 journalists have been killed in Mexico since 2010. Cuesav first went into the news business.
“WE’RE GOING TO BE WHERE NO ONE ELSE IS”

In the wake of the devastation wrought by Hurricane Maria, journalists in Puerto Rico are doubling down on independent news organizations

By Laura N. Pérez Sánchez

Carlos Torres draws with the aid of his cellphone’s flashlight in San Isidro in Canóvanas after Hurricane Maria. The category 4 hurricane ravaged the island, leaving it under complete darkness.
La Perla del Sur is the latest in a string of independent media initiatives in Puerto Rico seeking to provide critical information during a time marked by natural, economic, and political disasters. Over the past five years, Puerto Ricans have experienced the catastrophe of Hurricane Maria, an ousted governor, a string of earthquakes that shook the country’s southern coast, a global pandemic and, most recently, catastrophic flooding in the wake of Hurricane Fiona. All this in the midst of a nearly two-decades-long fiscal crisis and a government bankruptcy process that brought austerity and cuts to public services.

Omar Alfonso, a journalist for La Perla del Sur for 30 years and currently its executive editor, is optimistic about the project’s future. A local businessman purchased the rights to the weekly’s name from the family of its founder, the late Juan Nogueras de la Cruz. “There was a mismatch between editorial progress and commercial progress,” Alfonso says. “On the one hand, the paper’s editorial reputation was growing, but, on the other, the company was bleeding money.”

Rather than relying on advertising dollars, La Perla del Sur is working under a hybrid model that includes fixed monthly contributions from local companies and individual sponsors — much like America’s Public Broadcasting Service relies on corporate donations to deliver programming — and income from special events related to their coverage and other topics of interest for the community. The hope is to have the resources to pay the outlet’s four full-time journalists and 20 freelancers and collaborators while also guaranteeing the outlet’s operation through the end of the year.

“The loss of La Perla del Sur caused an impact in the area, and institutions stood up and said, ‘Let’s do whatever we have to do to bring it back,’” Alfonso says. Since their return, La Perla del Sur reporters have documented the stagnation in the reconstruction process in the southern towns most devastated by the 2020 earthquakes. In Peñuelas, more than 500 houses left uninhabitable are yet to be demolished, and three years later families are still waiting to rebuild and resume their lives in their home communities.

Not all independent media outlets that have emerged in Puerto Rico in recent years are based on legacy projects or legacy financial models. In the wake of multiple disasters and the fiscal crisis, as well as the decline of television, radio, and text news sources, a range of more specialized — mostly digital and niche — projects have sought to fill the gap.

Thousands took to the streets to call on Ricardo Rossello, the governor of Puerto Rico, to step down in San Juan, July 2019.

Readers of the weekly La Perla del Sur (The Pearl of the South) in its home base of Ponce, Puerto Rico’s main southern city, and across the region were devastated by the loss of one of the few Puerto Rican newspapers to hold power to account in that area. The outlet was widely known, for example, for following up for years on the unregulated disposal of toxic ash from a coal energy plant in southern landfills, and the community’s protests against this practice. Journalists, too, bemoaned yet another closure, this time of an outlet known for its serious and rigorous journalism that had in recent years garnered industry recognition, including multiple awards.

But just three months after folding, La Perla del Sur announced its return, with new ownership and as a digital-only publication. The same journalists would be in charge of its coverage, but the funding model was new — and quite unusual in Puerto Rico.

Journalist and professor Amary Santiago Torres recalls meeting with her friend and colleague Cristina del Mar Quiles two months after Hurricane Maria in 2017.
when most of the island was still without electricity and struggling to access basic services. Together, they sought to answer the question: What would our ideal media outlet look like?

They knew each other from their years working in legacy media. Santiago Torres worked for 17 years at Primera Hora newspaper, which she left in 2015 after accepting an offer to retire early; Quiles left her job in the same newsroom in 2016. Together they concluded that their dream publication didn’t exist in Puerto Rico.

So, they decided to launch Todas to cover the multiple crises — as well as proposed solutions — on the island, all through a feministic lens.

“Looking at the panorama, all the layoffs and lacking opportunities, we decided that we wanted to create an opportunity, and we always thought big,” said Santiago Torres. Together, they used other Latin American feminist publications — like LaFem from Argentina and G&K from Ecuador — as guides.

In November 2018, a year after that meeting, Todas published its first stories, roughly coinciding with protests across Puerto Rico calling for the government to declare a state of emergency over a wave of violence against women. While experts warned about the increase of gender violence after a disaster like Hurricane Maria, Todas reported on the Puerto Rican government’s lack of resources to keep track of sexual violence against women. It was immediately evident that people wanted a publication like Todas, Torres says — the outlet had followers across social networks. Minet said the demand also put a strain on the young organization. “People gave us that approval, sharing our stories and asking for more coverage. … But we fell into a rhythm of daily coverage, which wasn’t what we’d planned. Now we’re trying to move away from that pace because we can’t keep up with it. “They are now focused on in-depth features that likely will publish weekly or every other week, and long-term investigations.

Despite the public’s warm reception, the founders of Todas still work as volunteers, and Santiago Torres acknowledges that growth has been gradual. But she believes that key players in the model and is confident they’re beginning to see results.

Unlike many independent outlets, Todas follows a for-profit model, combining grants from philanthropic entities and direct donations from readers with revenue from subscriptions, a branded content agency, and from profits go entirely to the project. Santiago Torres, who leads Equilátera’s work, said the newsroom keeps editorial independence by following strict ethical guidelines, making sure that, in case they need to cover a story on one of the agency’s clients, the reporter assigned has not worked with them on the commercial side of the business. Also, they do not contract with government agencies or public officials.

“It’s hard because we’re doing one job to support another job,” acknowledges Santiago Torres. Through Equilátera, they’ve created content for local media and for nonprofit and private organizations, and they also plan to provide social media management services. “We’ve tried to diversify our sources of income so as not to depend on just one,” she says. “At first, the work was voluntary. Now, we have a part-time journalist, and she gets paid. Columns are also paid, and our hope is to pay everyone eventually.”

As part of these diversification efforts, Todas has also collaborated with other independent media outlets, such as Puerto Rico’s Center for Investigative Journalism (CPI). Together, they’ve offered workshops for journalists on feminist coverage and launched a new gender-focused investigative unit. In early November, that team published its first investigation, in collaboration with the Miami Herald, revealing an alarmingly low rate of convictions of Puerto Rican policemen who had been arrested on domestic violence charges in the past decade. As part of the investigation, CPI had to sue the Puerto Rico Police Bureau to access public data on how many of these agents were still active and other information on how the agency deals with these cases. After a year in court, reporters were granted access to information that confirmed a poor implementation of domestic violence prevention policies within the force. (Disclosure: I also collaborate with CPI on stories.)

In recent years, as CPI has grown, it has sought to collaborate with other local outlets as well. The nonprofit was founded 10 years before Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico. Its mission: to produce investigative journalism and promote access to public information. “Before the hurricane, we had financing sources that allowed us to grow, increasing our budget from one year to the next,” says CPI’s executive director. But “none of us could have prepared to cover an event like Maria and the government’s response. That was a defining moment for the center.”

It wasn’t easy. First, CPI’s reporters — like many across the island — had to focus simply on surviving. In the days after the storm, they had limited access to electricity and gasoline, and little or no cell phone service. But over time, many people came to rely on CPI’s post-disaster coverage to understand the public’s needs, even as leaders denied the magnitude of the emergency.

Then came the summer of 2019, when CPI published a text chat between Gov. Ricardo Rossello and close aides mocking the victims of Hurricane Maria, as well as a hard-hitting story about government corruption. The revelations prompted social unrest that led to the ouster of Rossello. Unprecedented support poured in for CPI, including from citizens who spontaneously organized fundraising campaigns and donations from philanthropic organizations that support journalism.

“The center began to receive a lot of international recognition, which generated income and allowed us to put together a team dedicated strictly to development,” Minet says. “They’re not journalists; they dedicate themselves to creating campaigns, looking for opportunities for collaboration.”

With so many untold stories and a pressing need for investigative journalism in Puerto Rico, Minet says it’s increasingly important for organizations to share resources and experiences — and to find ways to strengthen investigative journalism as a whole. In addition to its collaboration with Todas — which Minet describes as an outlet that works “with great seriousness, with great rigor” — CPI is hopeful about the recent La Perla del Sur.

The two newsrooms have collaborated for more than six years, with La Perla del Sur publishing CPI’s stories. And in 2016, La Perla del Sur executive editor Alfonso Pizarro published an investigation with CPI that documented serious health impacts on communities in Puerto Rico and in the Dominican Republic due to exposure to the ash produced by the AES coal plant on Puerto Rico’s southern coast.

Alfonso won the National Journalism Award from the Puerto Rican Association of Journalists for the investigation.

He says the publication hopes to continue this type of work, telling stories from communities beyond the mainstream media’s radar and seeking answers to their questions: “We’re going to cover the city, the environment, we’re going to be pro-region and pro-country, and we’re going to be where no one else is, where no one’s paying attention, and where they need us most.”
RISING TEMPERATURES AND THE LABOR BEAT

Focusing on how extreme heat kills workers — and what should be done about it — is becoming increasingly important.

BY STEVEN GREENHOUSE
hen an extraordinary heat wave hit the Pacific Northwest in June 2021, with temperatures soaring to a record 116 degrees in Portland, it sent a hard-to-ignore message. As a result of that heat wave, more than 100 people died in Oregon, and one issue that was repeatedly discussed afterwards was the way extreme heat endangers older workers, utility workers, landscaping workers, and warehouse workers. A study done last summer by Public Citizen, a research and advocacy group founded by Ralph Nader, estimated that extreme heat contributes to between 600 and 2,000 worker fatalities each year in the United States. Those numbers are likely to grow worse because climate experts predict that the number of days with unsafe heat conditions will double between now and 2050. As global warming worsens, the world will see more intense droughts, longer heat waves, more severe storms, rising sea levels, melting glaciers, and more difficult conditions for many workers — especially for outdoor workers like agricultural workers, delivery drivers, and construction workers. Intense heat can cause, among other things, heat stroke, cardiac events, and kidney failure. “This is a very serious and growing problem with more high heat days this year and the highest temperatures on record in many states,” says Ellen Widess, former chief of the California Division of Occupational Safety and Health and senior advisor to the University of California Merced’s Community and Labor Center. “We’re also seeing extreme heat in parts of the country that have rarely or never experienced high heat.”

As a result of that heat wave, more than 100 people died in Oregon, and one issue that was repeatedly discussed afterwards was the way extreme heat endangers older Americans and those who live at home without air conditioning. But there was another serious danger that wasn’t discussed nearly enough: High heat can be a big problem for the nation’s workers, not just farmworkers and construction workers, but delivery workers, utility workers, landscaping workers, and warehouse workers. A study done last summer by Public Citizen, a research and advocacy group founded by Ralph Nader, estimated that extreme heat contributes to between 600 and 2,000 worker fatalities each year in the United States. Those numbers are likely to grow worse because climate experts predict that the number of days with unsafe heat conditions will double between now and 2050. As global warming worsens, the world will see more intense droughts, longer heat waves, more severe storms, rising sea levels, melting glaciers, and more difficult conditions for many workers — especially for outdoor workers like agricultural workers, delivery drivers, and construction workers. Intense heat can cause, among other things, heat stroke, cardiac events, and kidney failure. “This is a very serious and growing problem with more high heat days this year and the highest temperatures on record in many states,” says Ellen Widess, former chief of the California Division of Occupational Safety and Health and senior advisor to the University of California Merced’s Community and Labor Center. “We’re also seeing extreme heat in parts of the country that have rarely or never experienced high heat.”

Many occupational safety experts also fault the media, saying news organizations have done too few stories about this threat to workers and done too little to educate the public about it. “The problem is huge, and the media sometimes they just don’t get the breadth of it. There’s a failure to see how it’s affecting many workers,” says Juley Fulcher, a worker health and safety advocate at Public Citizen. “The media is there the moment there is a heat wave. That’s when they show up. The problem is the media isn’t there any other time to cover this problem.”

Some safety experts say one reason the media — and the nation — pay so little attention to the threat that high heat poses for workers is that the hardest hit occupational group is farmworkers, a group that society often overlooks, partly because it’s largely comprised of low-paid immigrants. Extreme heat often sneaks up on workers and can be deadly. A handful of media organizations have taken a close look at the problem. Sebastian Perez, 38, collapsed and died during the 2021 heat wave in Oregon. An in-depth article in Rolling Stone described how he was working alone in a field in the Willamette Valley, moving 30-pound irrigation pipes to help ensure that young trees survived the heat wave. Temperatures rose to well over 100 degrees that afternoon, and when Perez’s co-workers began a search for him after he didn’t answer his phone, they found him slumped on the ground, barely breathing. He died before the ambulance arrived.

With the mercury heading toward 88, firefighter Yaroslav “Yaro” Katkov, a 28-year-old immigrant from Ukraine, was doing a standard training exercise, hiking a 1.45-mile loop in a mountainous area halfway between Los Angeles and San Diego, NPR reported. Even though Katkov was lagging badly behind the others, the fire captain ordered the squad to repeat the loop. Katkov soon collapsed and was airlifted to a hospital. He died the next day from “heat illness,” according to NPR. On a July day that hit 96 degrees, Karl Simmons, a 30-year-old African-American Navy veteran, collapsed while working in Fort Worth to patch the turf of a soccer field. A passerby saw Simmons sprawled on the ground, facedown, and alerted his co-workers. He was rushed to a hospital but died from heat stroke. According to an article by Columbia Journalism Investigations and the Texas Newsroom, “His body temperature registered 107.1 degrees — high enough to shut down internal organs such as the heart and kidneys.”

“One thing that is so important to get across is the craziness of this — this is all preventable,” says Katkov's mother after he passed away.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: Field worker Guillermo Zamaripa cuts corn for his horse in California’s San Joaquin Valley, Aug. 2020. More frequent heat waves and smoke from wildfires have made working conditions more dangerous for farmworkers in California

LEFT: Construction workers clean the floor of a steel structure in triple-digit heat in downtown Los Angeles, Sept. 2022

PREVIOUS SPREAD: Field worker Guillermo Zamaripa cuts corn for his horse in California’s San Joaquin Valley, Aug. 2020. More frequent heat waves and smoke from wildfires have made working conditions more dangerous for farmworkers in California
As the Amazon warehouse where Karen Salasky worked grew hot, her productivity dropped, she felt ill and, she said, her temporary job was terminated.

Julia Shipley, a former investigative reporting fellow at Columbia Journalism School who was part of the team that did a year-long project about extreme heat and workers that looked into Simmons’ and Karkov’s deaths. “These workers arrive at their job in the morning. They’re healthy and functioning people. They kiss their wife or husband good-bye. They wave to their kids going off to school. They’re human beings like you and me, and they’re dead by the end of the day. It’s crazy to take a human being who’s healthy, and through this process of … rising core temperatures and bodily efforts and the lack of water and the lack of shade and the lack of breaks and the lack of attention they suddenly die. It’s so insidious. When a worker is crushed by a bulldozer, that’s an easy to blame other cause, such as heart attacks or respiratory conditions. “Extreme heat causes the body to become so hot that it stops functioning,” Michaels adds. Public Citizen’s report said that “environmental heat is likely responsible for 170,000 work related injuries every year, and possibly many more.” For instance, high heat can make workers dizzy or faint, and that can cause workers who operate machines to make mistakes that can seriously injure them or their coworkers. 

Widess says the media could do far more to educate workers, employers, and the public about extreme heat. “It would be good to cover the scientific evidence to make it more of an acknowledged problem, not a random thing — not a high heat day here and there, but a kind of relentless or ongoing problem,” she says. “Better media coverage could pressure employers to take the necessary steps to help workers. Better media coverage could put more pressure on policymakers to adopt rules or standards, to act in the void of federal inaction.” 

California, Oregon, Washington, and Minnesota are among the only states that have adopted heat standards requiring employers to take specific steps in hot weather — such as giving periodic breaks to cool off. (Colorado recently created one specifically to protect farm workers.) Worker advocates like Widess hope that other states will soon adopt such standards.

Public Citizen’s Fulcher says the media could play a valuable role in reducing heat deaths and illnesses. “The media should really start focusing stories on this in the spring or early in the summer,” she says. “You want to do a lot of advance awareness before, rather than after, raising awareness among the general public.”

The occasional stories about workers dying from heat stress indicate that employer and employer alike often paid scant attention to heat’s potential dangers. A Los Angeles area postal worker, 63, Peggy Frank, died after temperatures in her mail truck climbed to 137 degrees. On a day when the heat index hit 90, a 47-year-old laborer died on his third day on the job, doing roofing work at a high school in Jefferson City, Missouri. A day after he turned 24, Esteban Chavez Jr., a UPS driver, passed out in his truck and died after finishing the last of his 70-mile route on his route in Pasadena, California. The temperature was in the upper 90s. In an area where one wouldn’t expect heat deaths — the Santa Monica Mountains, where many outdoor workers are found — 80-year-old laborer, 35, died on the second day on his construction job. He was working in 95-degree heat on a bridge project over the Genesee River near Rochester. “A disproportionate number of workers who die are new workers, not acclimated to working in high heat.”

If workers and employers are educated to recognize the symptoms of heat exhaustion — which pre-
Some occupational safety experts argue that the media should examine what they say is insufficient enforcement to protect workers from heat. Several say that federal OSHA and Cal/OSHA are badly understaffed and need more inspectors to investigate heat-induced deaths and illnesses. Another problem: Even when OSHA levies fines against an employer for failing to prevent a worker’s death, judges sometimes overturn those fines, saying employers shouldn’t be punished when there aren’t specific federal heat regulations stating what an employer’s obligations are in such situations.

David Nickerson, a data journalist with the Bay Area News Group in California who worked on the Columbia investigation team with Shipley, has done extensive reporting on extreme heat. He suggests that journalists do more accountability stories that examine whether government safety officials have followed up on ensuring safety improvements after a workers’ heat death and whether companies where a worker died have taken the promised steps to prevent future heat deaths.

Speaking about Hellas Construction, the company that employed Simmons, Nickerson says, “It was remarkable that what happened with Hellas is a worker died from heat, and then OSHA inspected the company and there was an agreement to stop this from happening again. But the company did not fully follow up. When a worker named Pedro Martinez Jr. came in a year later, on his third day at work again there was no shade and again there was limited water, and that day another worker died.”

Another problem, according to Tigchelaar, “is the industry opposition to creating federal heat regulations, whether from agricultural employers or warehouse companies. For instance, the National Cotton Council strongly opposes Biden’s plan to adopt a heat standard, even though the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health first called for such heat-stress rules in 1972. After previous administrations failed to act to create a standard, the Biden administration announced in September 2021 a plan to draft workplace heat regulations, but the process, which involves several rounds of soliciting public comment, could take five years.

Not only do they often work in searing temperatures without any shade, she says, but “these workers have little agency to set their own schedule or pace when it’s extremely hot because they’re paid by the piece,” and that creates considerable pressure to rush and work long hours. Moreover, Tigchelaar says, many farmworkers are scared to speak up about dangers like high heat because they’re on H-2A temporary visas and can be deported if they report. Safety experts say it would be helpful if the media did more stories about model employers or programs that do a good job protecting workers from heat. Some farms and construction companies begin their workday at 4 a.m. or so and try to end work around noon, sparing workers from toiling in the hottest afternoon hours.

Julia Shipley, the reporting fellow at Columbia Journalism School, sees one thing as key to writing stories about heat’s dangers and heat deaths: You have to take a deep dive and describe the whole person, she says. Shipley and her team wrote about Cruz Urias-Beltran, a 52-year-old immigrant from Mexico who collapsed and died while working on a Nebraska cornfield on a 91-degree day in July. “His core body temperature was 108 degrees — hot enough for the brain, liver and kidneys to shut down,” they wrote. Shipley noted that Urias-Beltran had traveled 1,300 miles from Arizona to take the Nebraska job because he was eager to earn money to buy his daughter a gown for her high school graduation.

To get readers to care, Shipley explains, “They have to meet and get to know, through the writing, the person who dies. You need the data and statistics, but it really helps to make the readers grieve. These people who die, they can’t be just workers, they have to be people you know. That’s why you take a deep dive about who that whole person was. He died in the cornfield to buy a graduation dress for his daughter. That’s as core to the story as what his body temperature was.”

“people you know... He died in a... That’s as core to the story as what his body temperature was.”

Julia Shipley, former investigative reporting fellow

Pedro Lucas (center) is the nephew of farm worker Sebastian Francisco Perez, who died while working in an extreme heat wave in Oregon in July 2021
1967
Philip Meyer was honored recently at the Brazilian Conference on Digital Journalism and Digital Methods (CoDaBr) in São Paulo. An exhibition at the conference, “50 Years of Digital Journalism: A Tribute to Philip Meyer,” featured photos, documents, and books written by Meyer, who developed the concept of precision journalism during his Nieman Fellowship at Harvard.

1977
Jose Antonio Martinez Soler recently received the 2013 Honor Award from the Madrid Press Association for his lifetime achievements in journalism. The group recognized him as a “tireless, risk-taking, committed and courageous professional, not only in the practice of journalism but as an entrepreneur and founder of different publications.” He also was director of the National News Agency EFE.

1988
Dale Mahariade was a scriptwriter on two episodes of “Lucy,” the third season of the Turner Classic Movies podcast “The Plot Thickeners,” which tells the life story of actress and producer Lucille Ball. The series won two inaugural Signal Awards from the International Academy of Digital Arts and Sciences.

2001
J.B. Mochringer was the ghostwriter for “Spare” (Penguin Random House, June 2001), the memoir by Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex, that reveals intimate details of his life as a broker and a member of the British royal family.

2006
Mary C. Curtis won a Clarion Award for her Roll Call columns from the Association for Women in Communications in the online journalism and column category. She also won a Salute to Excellence Award from the National Association for Black Journalists in the digital media commentary/weblog category.

2007
James M. Scott is author of “Black Snow: The Firebombing of Tokyo, and the Road to the Atomic Bomb” (W.W. Norton & Company), a reconstruction of the American air attack on Tokyo on the night of March 9, 1945, which destroyed 16 square miles of the city and killed 100,000 men, women, and children.

2008
Dan Vergano has started a new position as a senior opinion editor at Scientific American. He previously was a science reporter at Grid and RunzFeed and was a senior writer-editor at National Geographic.

2016
Debra Adams Simmons, executive editor of history and culture at National Geographic, and publisher editor of The Plain Dealer in Cleveland and the Akron Beacon Journal, has joined the board of the Ohio Local News Initiative. The network recently reached the nonprofit news site Signal Cleveland.

2017
Tyler Brindgies is author of “Five Latelaters and a Trombone: Cal, Stanford, and the Wildest Ending in College Football History” (Triumph Books), a book about a famous moment in sports history.

2018
Mary Beth Sheridan will start a new role in April as The Washington Post’s Mexico City bureau chief. She has been reporting from Mexico and Central America as a correspondent for The Post, where she previously covered diplomacy, homeland security, and immigration. She served as deputy foreign editor from 2016 to 2018. She joined The Post in 2001.

2014
Alison Richardson, Ph.D., associate professor of journalism at the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School and a 2014 Nieman Fellow, has launched the Charlotte Bass Journalism & Justice Lab, the West Coast’s first extended reality (XR) Black media archive and experimental storytelling space.

2013
Anna Fifield is returning to The Washington Post in January to become Asia-Pacific editor, overseeing coverage of a region increasingly influenced by China. Fifield previously spent two decades as a foreign correspondent, first for the Financial Times and then at The Post, in Sydney, Seoul, Beijing, Tokyo, Singapore, and Hong Kong. She joined The Post in 2001.

2017
Wendell Steavenson, a foreign correspondent who has been reporting on the war in Ukraine for The Economist’s 1843 Magazine, is author of the new novel “Margin” (W.W. Norton, January 2023), a coming-of-age novel set in the 1930s and ’40s on the North Shore of Long Island.

2012
Felicia Fonseca has been promoted to assistant news director for the Southwest, overseeing two teams covering China, Southeast Asia, and Hong Kong. After his Nieman Fellowship in 1963–64, he served as the Time-Life bureau chief in Tokyo, before becoming Time’s bureau chief in Moscow and later The Washington Post correspondent and diplomatic editor. He now serves as the Post’s diplomatic editor and foreign-affairs columnist for Esquire in the 1980s.

2005
Jerrold L. Schecter, a 1964 Nieman Fellow who reported from Asia, the Soviet Union and the White House as a correspondent and diplomatic editor, wrote several other publications, all published by National Geographic. He helped acquire Nikita Khrushchev’s revelatory audio diaries and served as associate White House press secretary under President Jimmy Carter.

2008
Tyler Brindgies is author of “Five Latelaters and a Trombone: Cal, Stanford, and the Wildest Ending in College Football History” (Triumph Books), a book about a famous moment in sports history.

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“I Carry the Tears of Victims”  
Sheikh Sabiha Alam, NF ’23, on covering human rights violations in the narrow space left for independent journalism

By AndreA Bruce

At my house in the northeastern part of Bangladesh would break with a rally of sounds. First, it was Azaan, the call to prayer from the mosque. Then came my dad’s recitation from the Holy Quran, tingling sounds from the kitchen, some music on the radio, and my mother humming along with it. I resisted all those sounds, pressing the pillow over my ears, reluctant to wake up for school. When the signature tune of BBC Bangla came on, though, I knew that was the last call for me to get out of bed.

In Bangladesh in the mid-80s, children like me from middle-class and lower middle-class families used to listen to bedtime stories and lullabies from our mothers. Most middle-class families used to listen to bedtime stories and lullabies from our mothers. The stories were essentially fairy tales from Bengal or the Soviet Union, very few of us heard Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tales or fairy tales from Japan or Africa. My siblings and I could not always align our lives with the fairy tale characters. There was always some tension, a distinct kind that hovers over every refugee family.

My parents left their home in India after the great partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 and moved to the eastern part of Bengal, now Bangladesh, which became independent in 1971. For the rest of their lives, my parents found it hard to make ends meet. They wanted us to leave a mark on the world. So, they introduced us to the Abrahamian prophets, the gods and goddesses from the Indian epic Ramayana, the speeches of Abraham Lincoln and Mahatma Gandhi, and cultural figures like Michael Jackson and Muhammad Ali.

We would read the newspaper aloud as a family. And as a teenager, I decided to become a journalist like BBC correspondent Lyse Doucet, whom I greatly admired.

Newspapers and radio played a defiant role in Bangladesh’s liberation war. But just four years after independence, the government banned publication of all newspapers except four, which were controlled by the state. Censorship, the murder and persecution of reporters, and poor salaries were the norm.

The situation hasn’t changed much. According to Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Bangladesh ranked 162 out of 180 countries in its World Press Freedom Index. Reporters are routinely harassed; perpetrators enjoy impunity and often receive encouragement from the powerful. In 2020, journalist Golam Sarwar was sent to prison. Reporters are routinely harassed; perpetrators enjoy impunity and often receive encouragement from the powerful. In 2020, journalist Golam Sarwar was sent to prison.

In 2020, journalist Golam Sarwar was sent to prison. Bangladesh’s first online newspaper, then moved on to stints at The Daily Star and BBC Bangla, before joining Prothom Alo, the largest Bengali daily. Over the past 17 years, I’ve witnessed and covered major events that shaped the history of Bangladesh — the 2013 collapse of Rana Plaza that claimed over one thousand lives, cyclones and floods, ISIS attacks, and state-sponsored brutality against dissidents. Then came the pandemic. The media industry in Bangladesh was already going through a rough patch and, like in so many newsrooms around the world, Covid-19 just made things worse. During the same period, my phone was hacked, and a private conversation was released that caused me public embarrassment and in my newsroom.

Some advised me to quit journalism. But how could I do that? I carry the tears of victims — their anguish, anger, despair, and disbelief. Storytelling is the only tool to relieve this burden.

One of the poems I read as a child was Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” The ancient mariner killed an albatross — a good omen at sea — on a whim, and his ship immediately became becalmed. Angry sailors hung the dead albatross around the ancient mariner’s neck. And with the dead albatross hanging from his neck, the ancient mariner watched his fellow sailors, “being one by one.”

During this difficult period, I felt like the ancient mariner. It felt like watching the end of my career. But the Nieman fellowship has given me hope.

The space for independent journalism in Bangladesh is narrow, and any new outlet requires government approval. But after the Nieman fellowship has put fresh wind in my sails.

The Nieman fellowship has put fresh wind in my sails.

Facing Hunger — and Death — In Somalia

A combination of drought, armed conflict, and ineffective government is making life a type of torture for the most vulnerable

BY ANDREA BRUCE

Sit next to Faduma in her tent in Baidoa, Somalia, the morning after her three-year-old daughter Hawa died from malnutrition.

Hawa was 165,000 refugees have fled to Baidoa looking for help because of Somalia’s worst drought in four decades. Over eight million Somalis are at risk of famine, and at least 1.4 million children have experienced “acute malnutrition,” according to the U.N. In Baidoa, I witnessed hospitals filling with starving children suffering from measles, pneumonia, and other diseases that prey on the weak.

After five failed rainy seasons, Somalia hasn’t seen the precipitation needed to support agriculture. Enough to grow grass on the side of the road, but not enough to sustain a farm for long. Because of this rain, men left their tents and families to return to their farms and attempts to bring them back to life. Drought, the ongoing conflict with terrorist organization Al Shabab, and an ineffective government has made the current famine in Somalia a type of torture for the everyday people who live there. That’s especially true for the mothers left with little to keep their children alive.

Faduma sits in her tent in Baidoa, Somalia, the morning after her three-year-old daughter Hawa died from malnutrition.
“We do our job while we can. When it becomes impossible, we’ll think about something else.”

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