RIDING THE A.I. WAVE

HOW NEWSROOMS CAN HARNESS THE POWER OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE
Contributors

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BY ANN MARIE LIPINSKI

Mary Knoblauch, my first full-time editor, died recently. There was a photograph at the wake showing her with a small team of reporters celebrating a series that won some awards. I am one of the reporters in the photo, but the victorious portrait didn’t remotely capture my memory of working for her.

I no longer recall the subject of the story that earned her disapproval and my first professional rebuke, but I won’t forget her beside my desk handing me a typed spelling quiz. I had misspelled several words, including former Chicago Mayor Jane Byrne’s name. She asked that I correct the errors. Most stunning was the succinct talk that accompanied the quiz: This is about more than spelling, she told me. You are a good reporter and writer, but you will never be a great journalist if you don’t tend to the details.

Initially I felt humiliated but eventually humbled. I was grateful for the formative lesson at the start of my career and thankful that I came up in an era before hedge fund economics hollowed out newsrooms of mid-level editors like Mary. Many years later, her comments still sting. By habit, I rechecked the spelling of Jane Byrne’s name twice before filing this column.

“Requiem for the Newsroom,” a recent Maureen Dowd column that circulated on social media, reflected on the passing of the mid-level editor. To this day, I believe the profession is greater than ever, particularly as AI tools rapidly get better. Pretty much anyone will be able to produce a believable deepfake,” Semafor editor-in-chief Ben Smith wrote. “My own biggest worry is the mischief that will take place where nobody’s watching — in hyperlocal political contests, and in people’s personal lives.”

Not long after Knoblauch’s wake, I traveled to Concord, N.H., for the memorial service of my friend Mike Pride, the Concord Monitor’s legendary editor for a quarter of a century and then administrator of the Pulitzer Prizes. Pride and his paper had won many accolades, including a Nieman Fellowship, the National Press Association’s Editor of the Year award, and the Pulitzer Prize. But his greatest legacy was found there in the pews of St. Paul’s Episcopal Church. The journalists who had been mentored by Pride had returned to Concord to pay tribute to their old boss.

Their stories were of a piece. Pride had rolled the dice on them in their 20s, shaped them with editing that was tough but fair, encouraged ambition, watched them graduate to bigger newspapers, then started the cycle over again with a new group of initiates. One editor drew knowing laughter from the church when he recalled the withering look Mike gave him for misspelling the word “misspell” in a correction about a misspelling.

By all accounts, that look alone could shape careers. At the memorial that day were Monitor alumni who went on to win Pulitzer Prizes and jobs at The Washington Post, The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Boston Globe, National Geographic, and Serial. But it wasn’t always thus. Felice Belman, a former Monitor editor who is now a metro editor at The New York Times, recalled the “boneheaded” mistakes of which they had all been capable when they started in Pride’s newsroom.

“Maybe you were the guy who misspelled Winnipesaukee in a story about Winnipesaukee,” she said. “Or you put too many Us in Sununu. Or too few. Maybe you botched a quote or miscalculated the local tax rate. … Maybe you mixed up Hillsborough and the other Hillsboro. … I know you all made these mistakes — and more — because you told me about them.

And with terror in your young voices, you asked: ‘Is Mike going to fire me?’ The answer was almost always no.”

She added, “Small newsrooms in New Hampshire and across the country used to be full of veteran editors — some gifted, some mediocre — who could at least teach the basics to the next generation. But what Mike did for us, and by extension for Concord and for the state, was something quite beyond the basics.”

A week or so after Pride’s memorial service, I watched an episode of The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel where the Tony Shalhoub character, writing for the Village Voice, describes himself as suffering a “dark night of the soul” because he misspelled Carol Channing in his column.

“Look at it!” he says, pointing to the paper’s correction before reading it aloud. “On Monday, Carol Channing was incorrectly spelled as Chaning. Ugh. I’ve been branded. I’m … I’m Hester Prynne! Two Ns in Prynne, by the way.”

The bit was played for comico-socialistic and Shalhoub as obsessive, a reminder that the detailed and fastidious are often painted as weird. But I think he would have been Pride’s kind of reporter. As someone taught me, and as Mike well knew, it was always about more than spelling.
How One Journalist Unearthed the Secret History of Family Separation

Atlantic reporter Caitlin Dickerson on how she produced the 30,000-word investigation on Trump’s “zero tolerance” border policy

In 2018, the Trump administration’s so-called “zero tolerance” border policy separated over 5,000 children from their families, hundreds of whom have still not been reunited. Caitlin Dickerson, now a staff writer at The Atlantic, was one of the many reporters covering the family separations as they happened. But “despite the flurry of work that we produced to fill the void of information,” Dickerson wrote in her September 2022 investigation for the magazine, “we knew that the full truth about how our government had reached this point still eluded us.” Over the course of 18 months, 150 interviews, and thousands of pages of government documents, Dickerson sought to peel back the ins and outs of how the draconian policy came to be, resulting in the book “Secret History of Family Separation” story for The Atlantic.

Dickerson spent nearly five years as a reporter at The New York Times and five years as a producer and reporter for NPR. She is currently writing a book for Random House about the systemic impact of deportation on American society and is a fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School’s Shorenstein Center.

Dickerson spoke to Nieman fellows in March about how the investigation came to be, the role of the word “zero tolerance” policy, why deterrence doesn’t work, and more. Edited excerpts:

On bureaucracy

I found myself rooting for bureaucracy and was surprised by it. It has as about has a reputation as any concept can have. Bureaucracy equals bad wasted time and pushed papers. It conjures people who don’t want to get anything done. And pushed papers. It conjures people who have a reputation as any concept can have. This systems exist for a reason. They should have acted as safeguards in this case. They didn’t because they were kept out of the room.

As you move down in successive layers in the bureaucracy, the scope of work narrows, but the depth of knowledge and the depth of expertise should increase. In an ideal world, I learned, when a policy is being batted around, it starts at the bottom. It’s vetted by the people who have very, very granular knowledge of very few things.

Only once they’ve approved it is it elevated to people who think about more abstract, general notions. Does this align with our administration’s goals in general? What’s the messaging going to be like? What’s the public going to react to? What are the political implications? Only after it’s been vetted by people who have all this information do we get to the top. That didn’t happen in this case.

The reason that I was rooting for bureaucracy is because you had people like Department of Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen making a decision about whether or not to proceed with this idea without being informed and briefed as she should have been.

That’s not to excuse anybody at any level of the bureaucracy. It’s just to say that it turns out that all of those layers and that perceived slowness is really, really important when it comes to debating a policy where the implications were this dramatic, significant, [and] lasting.

On sources’ responses to family separation

The one thing that I saw less frequently than other perspectives was “I feel responsible.” Put another way, what I heard most often was people trying to explain to me why this wasn’t their fault.

I was able to capitalize on that even when those conversations looked like people explaining to me how they weren’t at fault. In trying to explain their perspective, they said, “Yeah, I was sitting in the meeting.” “Did you say anything in the meeting?” “Oh, no, I didn’t say anything in the meeting because it wouldn’t be good for my career.” “OK, what about when they were still talking about the idea a few months later? Then did you say anything?” “Well, no, because it wasn’t a good idea to upset Stephen Miller.” Yes, a lot of people felt like they weren’t at fault, and they wanted to get that off their chest.

Laws enforcement people almost were in tears at the beginning of my reporting but then started being nervous right before publication. I can only assume because it became much more real — that this idea of challenging the Trump administration became much more real.

On the ProPublica audio inside a detention center

I think that more than anything, without a doubt, it was the audio that ProPublica obtained from inside of a large center of crying children that made this story break through to the public. I say that with pain, because I have been writing about it for a long time and saying that it was real, including on the front page of The New York Times.

Those stories penetrated for some people, but there was just nothing like that audio. I don’t think that’s a coincidence. It convey something that no other medium conveys. I wasn’t able to capitalize on that even in the other reporting that I did.

The thing I really felt strongly about the power of the sound of the human voice. It just converts something that no other medium can. In this case, it was especially helpful because of the kind of orneriness effect of journalism that has to do with immigration [...] immigrants in general. There was something very universal about the crying child that even Trump administration officials, who didn’t want to believe family separation was happening, couldn’t ignore.

The communications coming out of the Trump administration when this story first came to light were smart, slick. They sounded logically sound. They tricked a lot of people into believing that the children were cut through the noise and the euphemisms and the obfuscation and what was happening, and the stakes of it just became undeniable clear.

On why deterrence doesn’t work

You know who will tell you that [deterrence doesn’t work]? Border patrol agents. Some of them believe really strongly in this “gospel of deterrence,” but some of them have been around long enough to realize that they have seen these restrictions grow and shrink, and the one thing that is always true is that the border crossings will just increase.

[As] one person put it to me, the border is like the stock market. It [curves up and down], but it’s always going up. We see that. I’m sure you’ve noticed this too in the current coverage that obsesses over the Biden administration having broken the record for the number of border crossings. These stories rarely acknowledge that before that, the Trump administration broke the record for border crossings, or that prior to that, the Obama administration did. The record is broken every time, but we have this short-term memory for some reason.

From what was described to me in covering this story, the pressure and the fear around a backlash over the perception of being weak on the border, it just becomes overwhelmingly powerful. There’s this groupthink that sets in...
Covering Climate as an Indigenous Affairs Beat

Tristan Ahtone, NF ’18, on harnessing the expertise of Indigenous journalists to report on the environment

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hink about this metaphor from Indigenous and disabled climate justice expert Kera Sherwood-O’Regan (Kāi Tahu): Climate change is like a four-legged table, with each of the four legs representing a system of oppression. The first leg represents capitalism. “We can think about the fact that capitalism really requires an imperative for constant growth,” Sherwood-O’Regan says. “[Capitalism] uplifts and produces climate change because it requires us to continuously extract, to continuously produce,” ensuring the costs of those products are borne by the environment, or communities displaced by the waste or the impacts of emissions.

Another leg represents colonialism. “I can’t really think of an initiative that is more carbon intensive than taking a huge population from one side of the planet, putting them all on military ships, shipping them over to the other side of the planet where they encounter Indigenous peoples that they need to use force to subjugate, and then they want to change the entire landscape,” she says. The metaphor can extend as far as one likes: a leg representing ableism, another, racism. At Grist, where I have been editor-at-large working on the Indigenous Affairs desk since 2021, incorporating Indigenous frameworks into our climate coverage represents a fresh approach and illustrates one of our most important goals: coverage of Indigenous stories for Indigenous readers. And one of the best ways we can do that is by embracing the traditions and practices that Indigenous Affairs desks and reporters have used for years — examining the social, governmental, and economic systems that foster inequality. It’s a framing that’s particularly important for climate change because of the disproportionate effect rising temperatures have on Indigenous communities and peoples who have contributed to it the least.

Sherwood-O’Regan is just one of many Indigenous thinkers Grist’s Indigenous Affairs desk has turned to for inspiration and guidance since launching with a directive to cover climate and the environment exclusively. We believe this desk to be the first of its kind anywhere, and our separate Global Indigenous Affairs consortium brings together Indigenous journalists and Indigenous Affairs reporters to work on and republish Indigenous climate stories from around the world. The team harnesses the expertise of reporters at High Country News, ICT, Mongabay, and Native News Online to create collaborative, pooled coverage published across the network’s platforms. Indigenous journalists and allies are already in newsrooms around the world, and when we act together, we can take on more and bigger stories.

Initially, we envisioned Grist’s Indigenous Affairs desk as a way to plug Indigenous Affairs content into Grist’s already robust environmental coverage, but we quickly learned we would have to take a different approach. Instead of building an Indigenous Affairs beat inside already-existing coverage, we would have to invent that idea, covering climate and the environment in a specific beat inside Indigenous Affairs.

One example: A growing body of science reveals that when Indigenous communities have their rights to their resources restored, conservation and climate efforts can be accelerated. Legal recognition of Indigenous lands has been shown to increase reforestation efforts and can create legal pathways to stopping the development of extractive industries. In other words, Western science continues to echo what Indigenous science has said for centuries — that Indigenous communities are some of the best equipped to care for the planet and could be key to reversing climate change.

A recent story by our Indigenous Affairs Fellow Lyric Aquino provides one good example of this. By protecting Indigenous lands, nearly $2 billion in healthcare costs could be saved each year and up to 15 million respiratory and cardiovascular-related diagnoses could be avoided.

Rights-based approaches continue to provide some of the best outcomes of any climate innovation by providing legal pathways for Indigenous peoples to protect their homelands from development, but such solutions rarely make it into policy discussions, let alone non-Indigenous reporting. For our team, this allows us to turn away from the “victim” narratives that mainstream outlets continue to rely on and focus instead on stories that recognize the expertise of vulnerable people only vulnerable situations. It reinforces the reasons why we do what we do: Indigenous journalism is an ongoing set of actions and practices that support self-determination, sovereignty, and human rights regardless of political borders while providing critical information to the public.

Let’s return to Kera Sherwood-O’Regan’s metaphor. Maybe we magically fix climate change in the next five years. As we chop up the tabletop; it exists no more. The legs, however, are still in place. What are the new issues that those systems support? Access to health care comes to mind. For example. “We have a massive epidemic of suicide amongst Indigenous people,” she says. “All of those are created by the same systems that uphold each other.”

For Grist’s Indigenous Affairs team, this connects globally, and creates projects determined for us and by us, and in line with the constellation of ideas that underpin Indigenous journalism as a clear and distinct practice.

The Stanford band storms the field at the end of the 1982 Cal-Stanford game, thinking they had won. Cal waved through the band to score a touchdown, giving Cal a 25-20 win

Turning A 21-Second Football Play into a 264-Page Book

Tyler Bridges, NF ’12, on writing about the craziest finish in college sports history

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was December 2016, and my daughter Luciana and I were sitting in an outdoor jaccuzi after a day of skiing at Lake Tahoe. A guy in the jacuzzi mentioned he had graduated from University of California at Berkeley. When he learned I had graduated from Stanford, he couldn't resist teasing me about the Stanford-Cal game in 1982 — when the Stanford band was in the wrong place at the wrong time, creating the wildest finish in the history of college football. Afterward, I showed Luciana the video. Not for the first time, I got tears in my eyes as I watched it. I thought: I have to write a book on that game!

Why the reaction? It connected me with warm memories from my youth. I grew up in Palo Alto and attended Stanford football games with my father and sisters. And during four years at Stanford, I played trombone in the marching band, which didn’t actually march. I still remember where I was when I listened to that famous game, having graduated five months earlier.

But how do you write a book about a play that lasted 21 seconds? An initial set of interviews told me I would have plenty of great backstories to set up what happened that day. Central to the story was Stanford’s John Elway, considered one of the greatest quarterbacks of all time. The intense rivalry between two academic powerhouses separated by only 80 miles provided the perfect backdrop.

The research took me four years, which I did around my day job covering Louisiana politics. I photocopied 1,500 articles from nine different Bay Area newspapers and interviewed 375 people — players, coaches, referees, fans, broadcasters, and reporters. The result was my book, “Five Laterals and a Trombone.”

Throughout, my guide was the premise of the 1970s TV show “Columbo,” where the murder always took place at the beginning. You then watched to see how the quick detective solved the mystery. I figured readers would know who had won the game but would want to turn the page to find out what happened next if I had 5,000 great details and anecdotes that put them on the field and in the locker room. The reaction from readers tells me I took the right approach.
WHY RETIRED JOURNALISTS ARE JUMPING BACK INTO THE PROFESSION

They’re founding startups, coaching young reporters, and serving on boards to bridge the gap left by the industry’s contraction

By Jon Marcus
The Asheville Watchdog is a tiny nonprofit in far western North Carolina, but its editorial meetings could double as a get-together of the Pulitzer alumni club.

The project came together on the back deck of the house shared by retired Tribune Publishing Co. executive Bob Gremillion and his wife, investigative reporter Sally Kestin. It was there that Kestin and Gremillion “met other journalists who had come here and every time we got together and poured a glass of wine, we all had this kind of heavy sigh and wished that there was more and better journalism,” Kestin says. “Until somebody finally said, ‘Hey, we can do something about this.’”

The Watchdog is seeking to fill the vacuum left by the dramatic downsizing of the Asheville Citizen-Times, the local newspaper owned by Gannett. It’s produced by an unpaid staff of people mostly in their 60s and 70s who are retiring from distinguished careers at The New York Times, the Miami Herald, the Financial Times, Tribune Co., and NPR. Between them, they’ve won or been finalists for six Pulitzer Prizes.

The size and volunteer nature of this effort — it’s in what the Local Independent Online News association calls the “micro-revenue tier category” — marks the impact it had since it was founded in 2020, after Gannett sold the Citizen-Times’s building and cut its staff from 75 to about 15. In a multi-part series, for example, the outlet exposed a local real estate investor and his associates for deceiving Black and elderly homeowners into turning over the deeds to their properties for a fraction of their value. One of the members of that ring has been arrested on 41 felony charges as a result, and another on six felony counts. Several victims got their homes or money returned, and the series won a best investigative journalism award from the Institute for Nonprofit News, a National Headliner Award, and the top prize for public service journalism in the online division from the North Carolina Press Association.

“These are stories that could have and should have been told years and years ago, and they just weren’t,” Kestin says. “There were judges in this town that knew all about these real estate deals. Lots of other lawyers knew about what was happening. And nobody did anything until we came along and exposed it.”

Rather than moving to retirement communities and settling in beside the pool or playing pickleball, retired journalists are stepping into news voids nationwide, launching local and regional media outlets or serving on their boards, mentoring young journalists, advocating for press freedoms, and continuing to gather and report information not otherwise being covered. In some cases, they’re returning to their roots in local news, spending their retirements reviving the kinds of local newspapers and news sites that have been particularly hard hit by the consolidation of the industry by big media companies and hedge funds.

These retirees include everyone from a one-time local sportswriter in Washington state to former top editors at The Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post, The New York Times, and Reuters, a retired senior editor-director at CNN, familiar names from NPR, the ex-editors of the San Diego Union-Tribune and Miami Herald, Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalists, a retired AP bureau chief, and a former top executive at Hearst. Many are in their 70s or 80s. Many also share a collective frustration with the decline of the profession in which they spent careers that date back to a time when media organizations were flush with resources and influence.

“If you can do something to help reverse that tide, you do it,” says Walter Robinson, the former editor of The Boston Globe Spotlight Team, who has taken on a second career helping set up nonprofit community news sites, mentoring younger journalists, and serving on the board of a government accountability and First Amendment coalition.

“I had a great run and a lot of good fortune, and I just feel I have an obligation to give something back,” says Robinson, who is 77, of his continued involvement in the cause of journalism. “A lot of people I know who are my age have the same impulse.”

For Jeff Rowe, who’s part of a team of about 20 former Wall Street Journal reporters and editors setting up a network of volunteer editors and coaches for understaffed newspapers, especially in rural areas, called the Local News Advisory Team (LNAT), there’s less anger and “more fear and anxiety and deep dissatisfaction that we devoted our lives to has been abandoned, particularly in smaller towns,” says Rowe, whose colleagues in the project include Journal alumni Jim Carberry, Tom Herman, Joann Lublin, Janet Gayon, and Norman Pearlstine. Still just getting started, the LNAT has pilots planned with newspapers in Olney, Texas, and Signal Hill, California. It will provide editing and help with small projects and will be working with investigative nonprofits, the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues, and the University of Kentucky to connect with more.

“The bottom line is, we’ve got this expertise,” he says. “We want to share it.”

The determination of retired journalists to report, mentor, and fill other media roles is as widespread as it has been relatively little noticed. It’s “a national phenomenon,” says Barbara Roesser, retired Pulitzer Prize-winning former managing editor of The Hartford Courant who now serves as editor of The New Bedford Light in Massachusetts. The
Standard Times, the city’s Gannett-owned daily, also has been decimated by budget cuts. With other retirees on its board, including Robinson, the New Bedford Light has investigated delays in replacing lead-in water pipes, the disproportionate toll of Covid-19 on workers — many of them immigrants — who worked in the city’s once-booming textile and apparel mills, and property tax foreclosures over unpaid debts that were only a fraction of the properties’ value.

Taking on these roles involves more than just the journalism. The Asheville Watchdog, for example, solicits individual community donations. “That’s what replaces ad sales. It’s still money. Somebody has to attract it, account for it, and spend it wisely,” says Greemillion. The Watchdog’s total revenue in 2021, the year last for which the figure is available, was $94,915; public tax disclosures show. It uses volunteer designers, photographers, marketers, attorneys, and advisors and gives away its stories to other media for free. In addition to its award-winning story about that real estate scam, the Watchdog investigated the city’s neglect of its infrastructure and the murky sale of a nonprofit hospital system to a for-profit hospital chain. The news site also closely scrutinized Republican Rep. Madison Cawthorn’s conduct in Congress before he lost his bid for reelection.

Many media retirees are helping start or run local news outlets, too. Take Boisfeuillet “Bo” Jones Friedrich, who is 68, is now back in the newsroom as a copy editor, news reporter, and news editor, helped start up Gig Harbor Now in 2021 on Washington’s Puget Sound, three years after Gannett shut down the weekly that it owned there.

Gig Harbor Now is a throwback to the kind of local newspaper whose reporters and editors — some volunteers, others paid with money from donations and advertising, which tax documents show brought in $93,715 in 2021 — cover city council, other government agency meetings, seemingly every high school sport, new business, playground renovations, fire, and police blotter items. They have also reported on the allegations of racist comments at a girls’ basketball game and a bridge that needs replacing.

Almost none of these things were being reported any more in their community, says Friedrich and his colleagues. “There was nothing except for Facebook, which was worse than nothing most of the time,” he says.

Friedrich, who is 68, is now back in the newsroom as one of the writers, partly because, he says, “it’s difficult to find reporters and impossible to get young ones” to live and work for freelance rates in the comparatively expensive waterfront city. “On the flip side, we have a talented, experienced staff that most communities of this size can only dream of.”

Retirees are working behind the scenes at other local media outlets, too. Take Boissefule “Bo” Jones Jr., former publisher and chief executive officer at The Washington Post and former president and CEO of Macmillan/Leeber Productions. He’s part of a group that took over the Pasquières Times and Prince William Times newspapers in 2019, after years of declining advertising revenue and operating losses. The papers, which operate in two high-end counties in Northern Virginia, were combined into a nonprofit foundation called Piedmont Media. Under the foundation, which sells subscription “memberships” and collects tax-deductible donations, the community weeklies have produced investigations into a regional opioid crisis.

The trend of retired journalists taking on high-impact roles like these, even after careers of long hours and dead-line pressures, intersects with both an acceleration of retirement and changes in the way Americans approach it.

People in all kinds of fields saw up their retirements in response to Covid-19 and its effects on the labor market. Some 5.5 million who were 55 and older left the workforce in 2021, compared to about a million a year in the decade before, according to the Pew Research Center. And, of course, a disproportionate number of journalists have left their jobs, voluntarily or not.

According to employment data from Challenger, Gray & Christmas, which tax documents show brought in $93,715 in 2021 — cover city council, other government agency meetings, seemingly every high school sport, new business, playground renovations, fire, and police blotter items. They have also reported on the allegations of racist comments at a girls’ basketball game and a bridge that needs replacing.

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Almost none of these things were being reported any more in their community, says Friedrich and his colleagues. “There was nothing except for Facebook, which was worse than nothing most of the time,” he says.

Friedrich, who is 68, is now back in the newsroom as one of the writers, partly because, he says, “it’s difficult to find reporters and impossible to get young ones” to live and work for freelance rates in the comparatively expensive waterfront city. “On the flip side, we have a talented, experienced staff that most communities of this size can only dream of.”

Retirees are working behind the scenes at other local media outlets, too. Take Boissefule “Bo” Jones Jr., former publisher and chief executive officer at The Washington Post and former president and CEO of Macmillan/Leeber Productions. He’s part of a group that took over the Pasquières Times and Prince William Times newspapers in 2019, after years of declining advertising revenue and operating losses. The papers, which operate in two high-end counties in Northern Virginia, were

combined into a nonprofit foundation called Piedmont Media. Under the foundation, which sells subscription “memberships” and collects tax-deductible donations, the community weeklies have produced investigations into a regional opioid crisis.

The trend of retired journalists taking on high-impact roles like these, even after careers of long hours and dead-line pressures, intersects with both an acceleration of retirement and changes in the way Americans approach it.

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Some of these former journalists say they tried other things before they drifted back into the fold. When they eventually realized they could contribute more through startups, they didn’t intend to be doing this. I intended to walk by the beach and read and paint and not work around the clock. “After 30 years of agonizing over every word in a sentence and doing this kind of journalism, I was 68, says of his retirement. “To stay in the business that is 68, says of his retirement. “To stay in the business that long, you have to be a bit of an adrenaline junkie, so it shouldn’t be a huge shock that people who are adrenaline junkies don’t recover easily.”

Some say they feared being bored after high-paced, high-powered careers. “I love my grandchildren, but I didn’t intend to be doing this. I intended to walk by the beach, read and paint and not work around the clock. And that just didn’t last very long.”

Several of these retired journalists say their motivation is not only anger at the hedge funds and venture capital firms that have over-leveraged and are deeply cut in news outlets, or politicians’ enemies of the people rhetoric. Their reasons include that they feel a sense of obligation and have the needed skills or have been heavily recruited. “The jokey answer would be because we don’t have sufficient talent to do anything else,” says Tom Friedler, former executive editor at the Miami Herald and dean of Boston University College of Communication, who also retired to Asheville and became a reporter at the Watchdog.

And the serious answer? “We’re the same people who as kids drove our parents crazy by constantly asking nasty questions, I’m trying to learn how to do that forever, says. “We are a certain age, and the retired song of retirement does sound loudly in the hills here,” he says. “We had so many tools and resources and there was creativity everywhere. They might get disillusioned,” says. “There used to be something called the copy desk and that younger journalists prefer not to hear that.”

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Chatbots may reinvent the way we write news, but AI is also helping newsrooms connect with readers and reach new audiences.

By Gabe Bullard

Illustrations by Brian Stauffer
In May 2022, the Finnish public broadcaster Yle noticed an audience they weren’t reaching. Tens of thousands of Ukrainians displaced by the war had moved to Finland. Yle offered news in Finnish, Swedish, English, and Russian. Now, they wanted to offer it in Ukrainian. But it wasn’t easy finding Finnish journalists who could speak the language.

“When the war started, every media company was interested in those people,” says Jarkko Ryynänen, project manager for the Yle News Lab. Instead of having staff rewrite stories in a new language, Yle turned to software to translate. The team built a tool that ran stories through four different types of translation software and presented the results to staffers who knew both languages. It allowed Yle to publish stories in Ukrainian at a rate that would be impossible if the news were written and reported in the language from the beginning, the way many articles for Yle’s Russian and English services are. “With the computer, this couple of people are so much more powerful,” Ryynänen says.

Yle using AI to translate its articles is one of the more upbeat stories about artificial intelligence (AI) in newsrooms in a time that’s full of dire predictions for the technology’s impact on journalism.

The public launch of image generators such as DALL-E and Stable Diffusion and the chatbot ChatGPT had users flooding social media with machine-generated words and pictures that were crafted so well that the results seemed nearly authentically human. We’re used to seeing computers work with highly structured data like spreadsheets or lines of code, but these apps process words in a highly complex way. They offer a glimpse of how AI could both replace human writers and fill the internet with false words and pictures, thus making the role of a reporter simultaneously obsolete and more necessary than ever. Early experiments stoked these fears. The tech news website CNET announced earlier this year that it was pausing its program to write stories using AI after the resulting articles were not only riddled with errors, but rife with plagiarism. Mathias Döpfner, CEO of German publisher Axel Springer, which recently acquired Politico, wrote in a company email in February that “artificial intelligence has the potential to make independent journalism better than it ever was — or simply replace it.” In January, Buzzfeed announced internally that it would use technology from OpenAI, the company behind ChatGPT, to automate the writing of its signature quizzes. To assuage concerns, a spokesperson said the site “remains focused on human-generated journalism.” Two months later, Buzzfeed began publishing travel articles written with AI. Shortly after, it announced the end of its Pulitzer-winning news operation. “Human-generated journalism” can be hard to define. Visit a newsroom today and you’re likely to find reporters uploading recordings of their interviews to transcription services like Otter or Trint, while social media editors track trending topics using algorithms from Crowdrangle. A study from the Reuters Institute found that two-thirds of surveyed newsrooms were using AI to customize readers’ experiences, for instance by recommending stories they might like to read. Before it tried translations, Yle began using AI to track lawmakers’ votes. Another example is The Associated Press, which has published machine-written financial stories since 2016 with a goal of giving reporters time to focus on in-depth reporting.

AI follows search and social media in promising further disruption to the news business — especially as social media networks struggle to maintain relevance and search engines increasingly add AI features and chatbot interactions to their services. Google announced a new service this spring that would respond to some search queries with an AI-generated response instead of the usual list of links. Cleverly coded chatbots may threaten to reinvent the way we write news, but AI in other forms isn’t so much replacing journalists’ jobs as it is automating so many of the tasks that were heaped onto their workloads over the last 20 years.

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It’s studying publishers’ stories to find patterns in reader behavior and using those patterns to serve readers stories they’re more likely to click on. AI is even filling in boilerplate paragraphs and giving writers a head-start on their first drafts. Maryna Onatska and her son Mykhailo at a peace event organized in support of Ukraine in Helsinki. Finnish broadcaster Yle uses AI to translate its stories for the thousands of Ukrainians who have moved to Finland amid the war.

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“If we think of AI as a support tool in a lot of these various arenas, we get a lot more mileage out of what AI can actually do,” says Dalia Hashim, AI and media intelligence lead at the Partnership on AI, a nonprofit coalition of businesses, media, and academic organizations that recommends best practices for using AI.

But the difference between being helped by AI and being fully enabled by it lies in understanding how it works and reinforcing the value of the human side of journalism.

AI, NATURAL LANGUAGE PROCESSING, AND JOURNALISM

A "machinery" in AI means something of a catch-all for advanced algorithms that power everything from web searches to social media feeds. It means getting used to a new way of looking at old pictures to more advanced applications like DALL-E and ChatGPT. Both DALL-E and ChatGPT, which stands for Generative Pre-Trained Transformer, are made by the same company, OpenAI. Generative refers to the technology’s ability to generate data — words or pictures in these cases. Pre-trained refers to the process of feeding the app sets of data to inform it. Transformer is a type of machine learning that processes data.

The ability to adapt and be retrained is one reason why even the free and instant translations available online have become better over the years. And the more uses of language we employ, the more AI has to learn from.

Look through online translation services and the most commonly available languages will be ones with large bodies of training material — that is, an abundance of texts in context. AI translation tools are just starting to crack languages that haven’t been widely published, or widely published in multiple translations. This includes Indigenous or near-extinct tongues. "There’s really no reason that something shouldn’t be translated, if it’s not slided by language," Palder says, noting there may come a time when news outlets don’t feel the need to have a human review of the translations.

Le Monde’s goal is to make the English edition a source of revenue. The paper hopes to have 100,000 English-language subscribers by 2023. Camus declined to share current subscriber numbers but said growth for the English service has been steady, if modest. The name Le Monde carries more weight in the French-speaking world to respond to news at all hours — because humans get more efficient the more they work with the machines. "There’s almost this machine learning type approach to the work that we’re doing, where the translators themselves start to understand the ways in which the AI is likely to have messed up," Palder says. Likewise, the machines learn from these corrections. Some repeat issues can be cued into the translation software, so the machines know to translate a certain idiom a certain way, or to space em dashes appropriately.

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Yle has encountered a similar challenge finding an audience for its Ukrainian news. They have some readers, but not as many as they hoped. Samuli Sillanpää, tech lead at the Yle News Lab, says this may be because the audience they’re after would rather get news in a different format. Fortunately, AI can also be used to translate audio and video stories, and Yle is looking into implementing it.

**TEXT ANALYSIS**

Many reporters may already be using AI language analysis that’s a little more rudimentary than CharGPT and less complicated than MTTP. Apps like Grammarly, for instance, scan texts for grammatical errors and suggest ways to avoid phrases that aren’t technically correct but might be stylistically undesirable, such as passive voice or awkward syntax. By using AI to analyze news articles, rather than translate or write them, journalists can gain a better understanding of the work they do and help get that work to readers.

In 2022, the staff at The Atlanta Journal-Constitution saw an opportunity to rework the email newsletter they send to subscribers in the afternoon. “We had this hypothesis that maybe that would be a great place to provide some personalized recommendations for folks and give them a mix of engaging and essential stuff to read,” says Zack McGhee, senior director of digital audience development and incubation, says there’s typically a learning period for the AI and for its users — newsrooms may decide to surface more local stories or to not include editorial cartoons or very short stories. It’s a lot of work for something that, by design, could be fully automated one day or done by a human editor who can choose which stories readers should see. But McGhee says the customization of stories is one way to ensure the newswroom is reaching as wide an audience as possible. “We have a lot of different audiences, folks across generations and genders and the like, who we want to reach,” he says. “We can serve up content that is interesting and exciting and relevant and essential to them.”

For automation, the paper turned to the Belgium-based firm Twipe, which offers publishers newsletters that are curated and sent entirely by a machine. The Twipe software works by using AI to assign categories to a publisher’s content. In many newsrooms, this is done by humans — the person who loads a story into a content management system assigns tags and categories based on their reading of the text. These tags are helpful not just for recommendations, but also to determine how significant a particular topic is. But these tags can also be inconsistently applied. A story on a soccer match might be tagged “sport” while another soccer story is tagged “sports.” Twipe’s AI reads hundreds of stories and analyzes the stories a reader has clicked on while logged in, and then see, okay, consistently, we use this type of article leads to newsletter subscriptions, or one type of article is what leads to increasing our reach on social.”

By next year, Sillanpää hopes to have AI-powered source-tracking at Yle. Combined with other news organizations that might then share the story with their audiences. This kind of sharing “extends the impact of this coverage, and it helps with distribution of audience funnels,” Cross says.

INN isn’t eliminating human curators, though, it’s just giving them some help, she adds.

**SOURCE AND FACT CHECKING**

This kind of analysis has uses beyond aligning stories with reader interests. Yle’s engineers are exploring how AI could scan stories to look for signs of bias or lack of diversity. This begins by tracking sources’ demographic information, backgrounds, and political affiliation. Yle “currently track[s] some attributes manually,” says Yle News Lab’s Sillanpää, “but this is understandably time consuming and doesn’t scale.” By next year, Sillanpää hopes to have AI-powered source-tracking at Yle. Combined with other news organizations, this means the newswroom would be able to see who is quoted on which issues, with what frequency, and in what type of story.

This super-charged source audit could go even further, by deploying an application of NLP called sentiment analysis. This is a way that AI spots tone by examining the relationship between words. Some newsrooms use it to
Edward Tian released an app called GPTZero, which assesses the probability that a text was written by AI.

Summarizers work by essentially measuring the complexity of sentences and the range of word choice in writing. AI tends to repeat patterns, and AI detectors look for this. They’re not entirely accurate and do generate false positives, but they can be useful tools in identifying text that may be partially or entirely written by a machine.

As we’re inundated with automated information, it’s tempting to think AI could go a step further and recognize misinformation, whether it’s made by a human or a machine. But pure fact-checking is unlikely, at least in the sense that we might imagine AI labeling every statement true or false. To do this, a fact-checking AI would need to be trained on a database of every known fact, and even then, it couldn’t detect falsehoods like fabricated quotes.

Instead, Brennan believes NLP could be deployed to look for language patterns that are commonly found in misinformation — patterns like “hyper-partisanship, lack of sources, vague assertions, toxicity.” Tools like this can sort through the flood of online content and identify misinformation, AI-written text, and deepfakes at the same speed at which they’re created, which is crucial because human fact-checkers can operate. This would be helpful in steering reporters who want to debunk misinformation, or it could be deployed to reduce the financial incentives of posing eye-catching but incorrect information. Brennan envisions pairing this type of tool with advertising software so advertisers could avoid having their messages appear next to likely disinformation or deepfakes.

Stories Written by AI

Not all AI writing is bound to be misinformation or inaccurate. Thousands, likely millions, of news consumers have already been informed by AI-generated news. About a third of Americans have read a news article that was written by a machine, though it might use AI-suggested headlines or copy editing. As AI advances, its potential to remake newsrooms grows, and so do the risks for journalists who may see AI as a passing trend or an existential threat, rather than a new set of tools.

At Yle, the initial adoption of AI was met with skepticism. “Every time we introduce something like that, the first or second question will be: ‘Will this robot sack me?’” Ryynänen says. The answer was to frame AI as a colleague, not a replacement. A prominent Finnish news site called Yle Toimittaja, set rules around it, like Wired, which published a list of ways it would or would not use AI. The publication said it would not publish text written by a machine, though it might use AI-suggested headlines or social media posts. It was reported in April that Insider was forming a working group to experiment with using AI for everything from story outlines and interview questions to searching for headlines and copy editing. As AI advances, its potential to remake newsrooms grows, and so do the risks for journalists who may see AI as a passing trend or an existential threat, rather than a new set of tools.

The tedious parts of the writing process for stories can be done by machines in a process that gives humans control over the final product.

The science fiction journal Clarkesworld closed its submissions portal in February 2023 after editors were flooded with hundreds of short stories written by machines. Some of this AI content is for fun or is used in the name of efficiency. But other examples are meant to misinform or to profit from clicks in the attention economy.

Here, the best tool to fight misleading AI could be AI itself — a tool programmed to recognize images or text created by another machine. Earlier this year, a college professor’s research team trained a machine to recognize AI-written articles, and the results are promising.

By 2030, AI may be able to identify AI content with ease. But as AI content becomes more prevalent, the challenge will shift to how journalists and newsrooms should use AI-generated content. AI can guide our editorial processes.” Sillanpää says.

“We believe that automated ways for analyzing our content could be deployed after a human has reported and written a story. It doesn’t replace the reporter but rather reduces one part of their workload.”

The AP survey shows that many smaller newsrooms want AI to take on those tasks that take away time from human reporting but are essential to finding an audience outside the newsroom. They’re likely to want to take on these tasks. These include adding metadata to photos and stories, transcribing interviews and videos, writing closed captions, and so many other jobs that have become chores in journalism’s digital age.

But even if it might make their lives easier, the threat of AI is still top of mind for many journalists, especially as AI’s ability to help draft stories improves. Some publications have set rules around it, like Wired, which published a list of ways it would or would not use AI. The publication said it would not publish text written by a machine, though it might use AI-suggested headlines or social media posts. It was reported in April that Insider was forming a working group to experiment with using AI for everything from story outlines and interview questions to searching for headlines and copy editing. As AI advances, its potential to remake newsrooms grows, and so do the risks for journalists who may see AI as a passing trend or an existential threat, rather than a new set of tools.

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NOW I KNOW WHY MY WIFE WAS FIRED FROM HER GOVERNMENT JOB

In the age of digital surveillance, protecting sources vulnerable to retaliation requires an analog mindset

BY CELESTE KATZ MARSTON
ILLUSTRATION BY HOKYOUNG KIM
“During this saga, I have not ever feared for my physical safety. I have not ever been really afraid of the company [or] the Chinese government coming after me,” says Baker-White, who has reported extensively on whether TikTok’s “access to information about, and ability to influence, millions of U.S. citizens” is a national security risk. “But I know that there are [sources] I’ve spoken to who do have those fears.”

Baker-White is right to be concerned.

It’s been a decade since whistleb lower Edward Snowden, the former contractor working at the National Security Agency who leaked classified information about the U.S. government’s surveillance of its own citizens, chose to make his identity public via The Guardian. Snowden insisted that even though he believed he’d done nothing wrong, he expected “to suffer” for releasing sensitive documents — and accepted those consequences. But in countless instances in national, international, and local reporting, that’s simply not the case: Well-placed sources share tips and data that crack big stories — on the condition that their identities remain secret.

For journalists, protecting a vulnerable source is partly about protecting the flow of information. But the bigger, more important concern is that “somebody has entrusted their safety and livelihood to you — and that’s a pretty solemn, heavy responsibility,” says Glenn Smith, watchdog and public service editor for The Post & Courier of Charleston, S.C., and part of the investigative team that won the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for Public Service for a story about the extreme history of domestic violence and the murder of women in the state.

The same technologies that have dramatically expanded the universe of how journalists connect with confidential sources can also imperil their ability to keep the identity of those sources concealed. Electronic communications can be silently monitored by governments, businesses, or even criminal enterprises. And of course, there’s still the old-fashioned way: just having someone tailed. As authoritarianism has spread by governments, businesses, or even criminal enterprises, journalists use to protect the identity of their tipsters — or try to do so.

“Although there’s no way to be certain, in many cases, technology is simply the shortest route between tip and publication. As the threat of surveillance has ramped up, so have the precautions journalists use to protect the identity of their sources,” says Reed of the Committee to Protect Journalists.

While some journalists go to great lengths to follow that advice, in many cases, technology is simply not enough. “The Post protected Felt’s anonymity for more than 30 years until he went public; while actively chasing the story, they took now-legendary precautions (late-night parking garage meetings with no notetaking, coded signals, and more) to keep his identity secret.”

Of course, the Watergate era was a profoundly different time. Reporters and sources weren’t exchanging emails and texts in 1972, or carrying multiple smartphones, or communicating via text and video chat. In a more recent case, former National Security Agency linguist Reality Winner served prison time after printing out a secret document detailing Russian attacks on the U.S. voting system and anonymously mailing it to The Intercept. An Intercept reporter sent a copy of the report to the N.S.A.’s media office — with a cease in it showing it had been printed out. Only a few N.S.A. workers had printed the report, helping them identify Winner. After the incident, then Editor-in-Chief Betsy Reed wrote that “at several points in the editorial process, our practices fell short of the standards to which we hold ourselves for minimizing the risks of source exposure when handling anonymously provided materials.”

In that case, the source’s cover may have been blown during an investigation of their actions by their own workplace or agency as well as a lack of precautions by a media outlet. In other cases, investigative reporting may be the one under investigation.

“Two years ago, a media consortium coordinated by Forbidden Stories and supported by Amnisty International launched The Pegasus Project. The project used a massive document leak to show that nearly 200 journalists worldwide had been targeted for cybersurveillance via an Israeli firm called NSO Group, which created the Pegasus spyware and marketed it to autocratic and democratic governments among its clients. “If you read [case] studies of very famous whistleblowers,” such as Snowden and former Army intelligence analyst Chelsea Manning, “a lot of their initial contact with journalists was very frustrating, because they were trying to find a secure way to get in contact with journalists and journalists were not responding, basically, like Snowden, former F.B.I. official Mark Felt ultimately chose to reveal himself as “Deep Throat” — the source that helped The Washington Post’s Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein break the Watergate break-in story. The Post protected Felt’s anonymity for more than 30 years until he went public; while actively chasing the story, they took now-legendary precautions (late-night parking garage meetings with no notetaking, coded signals, and more) to keep his identity secret.”

Of course, the Watergate era was a profoundly different time. Reporters and sources weren’t exchanging emails and texts in 1972, or carrying multiple smartphones, or communicating via text and video chat. In a more recent case, former National Security Agency linguist Reality Winner served prison time after printing out a secret document detailing Russian attacks on the U.S. voting system and anonymously mailing it to The Intercept. An Intercept reporter sent a copy of the report to the N.S.A.’s media office — with a cease in it showing it had been printed out. Only a few N.S.A. workers had printed the report, helping them identify Winner. After the incident, then Editor-in-Chief Betsy Reed wrote that “at several points in the editorial process, our practices fell short of the standards to which we hold ourselves for minimizing the risks of source exposure when handling anonymously provided materials.”

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Nowadays to talk to certain people, we have [to] rent hotel rooms or Airbnbs so we can meet people. [We’ve] had to go out of the country to meet people … That’s the only way that they will talk to us.

The security measures to deal with intrusions include keeping your phone secure — or at least keeping the SIM card secure. Some argue that burner phones are necessary. "People who don’t have the technical knowledge are the ones who need burner phones," Nicki Jayne says. "They’re not easy to use and not as convenient as they used to be, but they’re a lot harder," Jayne says. "You can’t operate on code red all the time." Overprotection can even be a disadvantage, she says. You can’t check your SIM card with a PIN — but if you forget your code when you need to make an emergency call, you could be in trouble.

There are practical and relatively easy security measures any reporter can take, says El Faro’s Nelson Rauda. "I’d grab my cell, they can’t unlock it and get access to everything just by holding it up in front of you."

If you do need to physically secure your phone and your SIM card, there are apps for that, such as Bear, which allows you to lock your phone and email — but what about the software they use for taking notes and writing drafts? There are apps for that, such as one called Bear, that feature end-to-end encryption. There’s also the basic need to physically secure your device.

And reporters may choose encrypted messaging apps, such as Signal, and email — but what about the software they use for receiving of documents? "U.S. postal mail without a return address is one of the most secure ways to communicate. Authorities would need a warrant to intercept and open it in transit," Rauda says.

Ultimately, no system is foolproof, and no device can be 100 percent secure.

Some, like The Washington Post, use SecureDrop, an encrypted, anonymized “open source whistleblower submission system” managed by the Freedom of the Press Foundation. The Post’s SecureDrop instructions are explicit, starting with, “Go to a place with a public internet connection, one you don’t normally frequent.” The system gives sources a codename one else knows — not even The Post.

In addition to using SecureDrop, offers a whole page of ways to reach reporters, including via email, an online form, Signal, and snail mail, noting that “U.S. postal mail without a return address is one of the most secure ways to communicate. Authorities would need a warrant to intercept and open it in transit.” Ultimately, no system is foolproof, and no device can be 100 percent secure.

Ben Hubbard of The New York Times, who has spent years covering Saudi Arabia and wrote a book about journalists who have been targeted, says Prince Mohammed bin Salman, later dismissed his “unverifiable” experiences with having been hacked in a 2012 piece on how he was targeted repeatedly, most likely with Pegasus, even though he hadn’t clicked any suspicious links. "Despite the help of Citizen Lab, University of Toronto institute that studies spyware, the identity and motivation of his hackers proved elusive. It’s hard to steal my contacts so they could arrest my sources. Comb through my messages to see who I’d talk to? "Troll through photos of my family at the beach? Only the hackers knew," Hubbard wrote. "As far as I am concerned, no harm has come to any of my sources because of information that may have been stolen from my phone. But the uncertainty was enough to make me keep it locked."

Large, well-funded media outlets with robust security protocols are acutely aware that even the best defenses are not impregnable. Much of what they do to try to head off intrusions is also applicable to medium and small outlets and even in everyday life.

Neena Kapur, director of information security at The Times, says that as a baseline, it’s good to think about “using secure communication tools like Signal that are end-to-end encrypted” and setting messages to “disappear” (or auto-delete) periodically, as well as using two-factor authentication, which requires both a password and a uniquely generated code to get into accounts and apps.

It’s very easy to just (get) hardcore security immediately, but as a practical matter for everyday work, extreme measures like consistently using burner phones or toting a Faraday bag, which isolates mobile devices from external communication, won’t be effective “90 percent of the time, and will actually make people’s lives a lot harder,” Kapur says. “You can’t operate on code red all the time.” Overprotection can even be a disadvantage at times, she notes: You can protect your SIM card with a PIN — but if you forget your code when you need to make an emergency call, you could be in trouble.

Some media outlets encourage sources to share information in certain ways, but Rauda doesn’t think trying to steer them toward more secure tech always helps. “I had a 60-year-old judge who was my source. How do I teach this person to download Signal and talk to me using that if he barely uses WhatsApp? So for me, technological-based solutions are in a lot of cases worthless,” Rauda says. “I just try to find a way to live and manage situations [off] the grid.”

"After El Faro found out about the Pegasus intrusion, the site in January 2022 ran a detailed investigative piece explaining what it knew. The next day, "A source called me and said: ‘Hey, Nelson, I read the report. Now I know why my wife was fired from her government job,’" Rauda recalls. While Rauda’s still not sure the dismissal was directly linked to the sourcing, “I was devastated. [I] was feeling so guilty. [I’m] a victim in this case, but I felt it had been my fault.”

El Faro also spoke directly to its sources in a separate editorial, addressing the gravity of the exposure with a promise — and a prediction: “We will continue developing strategies to offer more and better guarantees to those who confide in us. That will in turn provoke ever more intense surveillance from the regime and greater attacks against our work.”

Reporting goes on, but sources are leery. There’s a real cost to that, Rauda says. “It’s harder. It’s more expensive, because nowadays to talk to certain people, we have [to] rent hotel rooms or Airbnbs so we can meet people. [W]e’ve had to go out of the country to meet people, [because] that’s the only way that they will talk to us. But we’re still doing it,” he says.

El Salvador isn’t even the biggest user of Pegasus spyware. That dubious honor goes to Mexico, per an April report in The New York Times.

Prominent Mexican investigative journalist Carmen Aristegui felt “a mixture of anger and powerlessness” when she learned she and her family had been spied on with Pegasus in 2015 and 2016. According to a Citizen Lab investigation, Aristegui received more than 20 texts that “included NSO links purported to come from the U.S. Embassy in Mexico, Amber Alerts, colleagues, people in her personal life, her bank, phone company, and notifications of kidnappings.” Her son, a minor at the time, was also intensely targeted. As in the case of many types of malware, the texts included links meant to give spies access to and control over the phone.

Since then, “One of the biggest problems is the loss of contact with some of our sources [who], once this scandal became known, distanced themselves, because there was no way we could guarantee the security of our information,” says Aristegui, recipient of the 2013 IFJ-IMS World Press Freedom Hero award for decades of fearless reporting on corruption in Mexico.

Other sources continue to cooperate, albeit “in a more cautious manner,” she says. While Aristegui continues to receive information elec-
In the surveillance age, the more you can stay offline, basically the safer you and your source will be

ELA STAPLEY, DIGITAL SECURITY ADVISOR FOR THE COMMITTEE TO PROTECT JOURNALISTS

where we’re talking,” she adds. A Faraday bag, which has the same kind of metal mesh as the door of a microwave, is another option.

In March, President Joe Biden signed an executive order prohibiting the federal government from using commercial spyware, having already blacklisted NSO in 2021. As The Times reported, the administration said NSO’s products were “being abused by authoritarian nations” to go after journalists, human rights advocates, and politicians. TechCrunch noted that Biden administration officials voiced concern that democratic governments had also adopted the technology and that “the United States was trying to get ahead of the problem and set standards for other governments and its allies.”

In 2021, the Justice Department was again revealed to have obtained the phone and email records of journalists from The Washington Post, The New York Times, and CNN during the administration of former President Donald Trump. The reporters were working on a range of stories from years earlier that had related to the federal government and Russian interference in U.S. elections.

That outliers learned sometimes years after the fact about the surveillance underscores that “there are scenarios where records that could disclose the identity of a confidential source can be obtained by governments, and you wouldn’t even know it. And [that’s] the real kind of danger zone,” says Gabe Rottman, director of the Reporters Committee’s Technology and Press Freedom Project.

“If your [phone] records are handed over to the Justice Department and you’re not notified, you can’t go to court to negotiate over the scope of the subpoena. What you’ve lost is a source, which includes records of calls to and from AP offices and reporters’ personal phones. But as AP noted at the time, the government was investigating who may have leaked information contained in [an] AP story about a foiled terror plot.” Pruitt said the case had a chilling effect on sources’ willingness to speak to reporters.

That same year it came out that the Obama administration had extensively tracked reporter James Rosen when he was chief Washington correspondent for Fox News, examining his phone calls, personal email, and entrances and exits from the State Department. Rosen was even labeled a co-conspirator with the person who leaked email that was later made public in the House Ukraine impeachment inquiry. While he ultimately wasn’t charged with a crime, The New Yorker pointed out, it was “unprecedented for the government, in an official court document, to accuse a reporter of breaking the law for conducting the routine business of reporting on government secrets.” A Washington Post report at the time also questioned whether the conspiracy claim was “little more than pretext to seize his e-mails to build their case against the suspected leaker.”

In 2023, as The New Yorker reported, the Biden administration launched an investigation into ByteDance’s TikTok, which the administration said was being watched by the FBI and Justice Department. The President, in a rare public statement, said he had ordered the Justice Department to create a 72-page dossier on him, including photographs of him taken without his knowledge.

As Florida Times-Union reporter Nate Monroe uncovered an investigation on Florida Power & Light, the company hired a consulting firm to create a 72-page dossier on him, including photographs of him taken without his knowledge.
A BILLIONAIRE, A TV NETWORK, AND THE FIGHT FOR A FREE PRESS IN INDIA

The hostile takeover of NDTV — one of India’s last channels willing to report critically on the Modi government — leaves few independent voices during a critical election cycle.

By Vidya Krishnan

With billionaire Gautam Adani’s acquisition of NDTV, the last of India’s private news channels will fall under corporate ownership that is politically affiliated with Prime Minister Narendra Modi ahead of the crucial 2024 elections.
Late November, Ravish Kumar, one of India’s leading broadcast journalists, resigned from his job as senior executive editor of New Delhi Television Ltd (NDTV), the last influential network still willing to cover Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Hindu nationalist government critically. The move was prompted by the company’s owner changing hands — from founders Prannoy and Radhika Roy to billionaire Gautam Adani, who at the time was the third richest man in the world and also has close ties to Modi.

Kumar’s resignation came hours after the Roys stepped down from NDTV’s board. It immediately started trending on social media, with former colleagues mourning the loss of a newsroom that trained some of India’s best journalists. The Deccan Herald, in an op-ed, called it the “demise” of NDTV, said it was a “sad day,” and added that “what is gained in money is lost in the nature and quality of journalism.” The Delhi Union of Journalists expressed deep disappointment at “the hostile takeover of the last independent mainstream TV channel.”

Kumar announced his resignation by uploading an emotional monologue on his YouTube channel, noting that Indian journalists and news consumers were witnessing “the dark age of journalism.” He said his heart went out to “those young Indians who are paying millions of rupees to train to be a journalist because they have to work as agents of the state. There is no institution left for ethical journalists.”

India’s media landscape has changed dramatically since 2014 when Modi and the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power. In the nine years since, Modi has consolidated his grip on the government, in part by cracking down on independent media through police violence, tax investigations, threats to journalists, harassment campaigns, and suspending much-needed revenue from government advertising. But with Adani’s acquisition of NDTV, the last of India’s private news channels will fall under corporate ownership that is politically affiliated with Modi’s BJP ahead of the crucial 2024 elections. NDTV was one of the last bastions of free speech within the Indian broadcast media.

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India has nearly 400 news channels “dominated by regional language channels and private players” and “no regulations on cross-media ownership,” according to a 2021 Reuters Institute study. The primetime shows, across national news channels, cover more or less the same stories, in more or less the same divisive editorial tone, with issues framed as caste or religious binaries. It’s a closed loop where little public interest information and almost no reporting critical of government policies or politicians. It has come to be sarcastically known as “speak-

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"Under the guise of combating Covid-19, the government and its supporters have waged a guerrilla war of lawsuits against media outlets whose coverage of the pandemic contradicted official statements."

REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS

ing positivity to power” among Indian journalists. It trickles down to regional channels, where the news is presented in the local vernacular, and sets the agenda for print and online media — each propaganda outlet compounding Modi’s power.

No story has revealed the inner workings of India’s slick propaganda network like the pandemic. In the early months of the pandemic, as the government failed to control the spread of Covid-19, television channels in India presented the pandemic as something brought into India by Muslims. TV anchors served the government in many ways — by cherry picking facts, filtering official statements, and allowing the Modi administration, which rejects World Health Organization data that suggest India has had the highest global death toll from Covid, to turn facts on their head.

The attack on minorities was not the only way the media served the Modi administration. There was an equally ferocious attack on science — much of which happened over social media. An international study of 138 countries, published by Sage’s International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions Journal in September 2021, noted that India produced the “largest amount of social media misinformation perhaps thanks to the country’s higher internet penetration rate, increasing social media consumption and users’ lack of internet literacy.” In India, facts are easily buried under falsehoods — often with the help of the country’s vast corporate media, which plays the role of galvanizing support for the government’s agenda and drowning out critical stories through a tightly concentrated network of media outlets.

Back in 1978 when the Roys founded NDTV, the government-run public station Doordarshan had a monopoly over television content. NDTV aimed to produce “the most objective and accurate news as quickly as possible.” They began with one show but quickly expanded the range of Indian television news, introducing high editorial standards of tightly vetted news reports presented by slick anchors. The station had ample advertising revenue that gave state-funded news a run for its money, noted a 2015 essay in The Caravan, an investigative magazine based in Delhi. (The Roys and their lawyers did not respond to repeated requests for comment.)

Over three decades, Prannoy Roy, an economist by training and a veteran journalist, along with his wife Radhika, also a journalist, revolutionized television news in India. The channels were a proving ground for many of today’s prominent news anchors, like Nidhi Razdan and Sreenivasan Jain, both of whom stepped down a few weeks after the Roys lost control. The network currently operates two news channels — one in Hindi and one in English — and a business and entertainment channel. The channels routinely covered stories that embarrassed Modi and his government. Jain, for example, did a segment on how the number of government “actions” against political opponents of Modi and the BJP surged to 570 between 2014 and 2021. He also closely followed the dire situation confronting hospitals during the second Covid-19 wave when oxygen was in short supply but government officials were denying the problem and saying they had no reports of the shortage leading to the deaths of any citizens.

NDTV was also one of the few channels to cover a religious assembly of Hindu ascetics in December 2021 in Haridwar, Uttarakhand, where they openly called for mass rape of Muslim women and a genocidal attack on Muslims in the name of protecting Hinduism. The channel identified the rhetoric as hate speech and put pressure on the courts to act when the government refused to condemn the event.

Even though NDTV had a reputation of being independent under the Roys, the organization wasn’t immune from criticism when they owned it. Over the years, the channel has been called out for a lack of caste and class diversity in the newsroom with a majority of its anchors coming from powerful families. In 2015, The Caravan noted that eight of the channels’ top anchors — including Barkha Dutt, whose mother was a pioneering journalist for the Hindustan Times, Sreenivasan Jain, the grandson of a former state minister, Rajdeep Sardesai, the son of a cricket player, and Vishnu Som, the son of the former Indian ambassador to Italy — came from families deeply enmeshed in Delhi’s corridors of power.

NDTV was a controversial channel, a proving ground for right-wing television superstars like Arnab Goswami, a controversial journalist whose hardline views in support of the BJP have earned him a lot of criticism. Goswami, for example, claimed that Modi “[broke] into poetry” at the ceremony marking the opening of the new Parliament building.) The Roys have never publicly criticized Goswami, despite his propensity to fawn over Modi, peddle conspiracy theories about the death of a famous actor, and baselessly claim an opposition leader was happy when two Hindu priests and their driver were murdered.

As television news evolves, digital and independent newrooms have started to build their own audiences. During his resignation video, Kumar announced the launch of his YouTube channel, which garnered over a million followers within 24 hours. He had three million subscribers by the end of the week. Today, his nearly six million followers have access to both his commentary and reported content on issues ranging from the right to education and healthcare to politics and elections. Beyond Kumar, there is a small band of indepen-
The acquisition of NDTV began as a hostile takeover in August 2022, when Adani’s AMG Media Networks Limited (AMNL) announced it had indirectly acquired 29 percent of NDTV, by buying out loans to the company. Within hours, the Roys issued a statement to “make it clear” that the takeover was created without any input from, conversation with, or consent of the NDTV founders, who, like NDTV, have been made aware of this exercise of rights only now. The share acquired was 29 percent, and AMNL made an open offer to acquire another 26 percent of NDTV. By early December, Adani’s conglomerate had acquired an additional eight percent through an open offer, making it the biggest shareholder of one of the country’s most trusted news networks.

In the months since the hostile takeover was announced, media experts and media watchdogs have blamed the Roys’ decision to take a $49 million loan in 2009 from Maseeh Ambani, a billionaire who hails from Gujarat and has close ties to India’s prime minister, the tone of the channels has shifted from a critical commentary on the government to a propaganda series, praising Modi for his nine years as prime minister, falsely indicating a 21st-century model for women’s rights, a major player on the international stage, and a leader who has delivered major welfare programs and infrastructure upgrades in service to the country. But even beyond the favorable coverage of the prime minister, the tone of the channels has shifted from presenting actual news to focusing on the lives of Bollywood celebrities and Hollywood, and salacious crime stories. One recent story covered a fist-fight that broke out at Disney World.

Adani Group, which owns seven publicly-traded companies in the transportation, utility, and energy sectors, issued its own statement, saying the takeover is an attempt to “empower the management of Adani Group companies,” which are those interested in India, with information and knowledge. Neither the Adani Group nor NDTV responded to multiple requests for comment. Long after the takeover, however, the new ownership eroded its influence on the news-gathering operations. On Jan. 24, Hindenburg Research, an American company specializing in financial research and short selling stocks, released a scathing report accusing Adani Group companies of “brazen stock manipulation and accounting fraud.” The conglomerate had used improper offshores tax havens, according to Hindenburg, which also flagged concerns about a high debt load that put the conglomerate’s financial footing in doubt. The takeover of NDTV was preceded by years of harassment. In May, NDTV aired what is essentially a multipart propaganda series, praising Modi for his nine years as prime minister, falsely indicating a 21st-century model for women’s rights, a major player on the international stage, and a leader who has delivered major welfare programs and infrastructure upgrades in service to the country. But even beyond the favorable coverage of the prime minister, the tone of the channels has shifted from presenting actual news to focusing on the lives of Bollywood celebrities and Hollywood, and salacious crime stories. One recent story covered a fist-fight that broke out at Disney World.

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Facing a corporate crisis, Adani went back on his promise of not imposing on NDTV’s editorial freedom. For three days, NDTV didn’t touch the Hindenburg story. When it did, it carried Adani’s statement verbatim, calling the revelations an “attack on India.” (Ranadive and Jain, the station’s top English-language anchors, resigned because of this episode, citing the lack of editorial independence.) In May, Sarah Jacob, an anchor who had been with NDTV for more than 20 years, announced her resignation the day after the channel ran a segment called “From His Mother To Political Leaders, How PM Struck a Compromise on Women” during which Modi — whose government approved the release of 11 men convicted of gang raping a pregnant Muslim woman and murdering 14 of her family members — about is seen bowing to women in several different clips. More recently, NDTV has become a mouthpiece for the BJP to air grievances against its political rivals. As the company’s founders lose control of it, the country’s first privately run channel has become a cautionary tale. “Prannoy Roy is paying the price for taking his business to places where capital did not have the character to understand how free media should be supported and promoted,” says Vinod Jose, former executive editor of The Caravan. “What NDTV founders did is akin to standing on a cliff on a stormy night, ignoring the warning on the wall — that you will fall.”

With the acquisition going through, the free press in India has been whittled down to a handful of newsrooms that cover the government critically. India’s veteran journalists — chowhed out of legacy newsrooms — mostly died out as freelancers by taking their investigative work to digital platforms. Aware of this dynamic, Modi’s government passed in 2023 an amendment to an existing law that allows the government to monitor digital platforms like Google, Facebook, and news websites through fact-checking units aligned with the government. While it’s not clear exactly how the law will be implemented, it gives the power to interpret what the facts are to the government. The Editors Guild of India has called this self-appointed fact-check “draconian” as it obliges social media platforms to not carry news that the government considers “false,” “false,” or “misleading” — all terms that remain undefined. Editors Guild of India has exactly how the law will be implemented, it gives the power to interpret what the facts are to the government. The Editors Guild of India has called this self-appointed fact-check “draconian” as it obliges social media platforms to not carry news that the government considers “false,” “false,” or “misleading” — all terms that remain undefined. Editors Guild of India has exactly how the law will be implemented, it gives the power to interpret what the facts are to the government. The Editors Guild of India has called this self-appointed fact-check “draconian” as it obliges social media platforms to not carry news that the government considers “false,” “false,” or “misleading” — all terms that remain undefined. Editors Guild of India has exactly how the law will be implemented, it gives the power to interpret what the facts are to the government. The Editors Guild of India has called this self-appointed fact-check “draconian” as it obliges social media platforms to not carry news that the government considers “false,” “false,” or “misleading” — all terms that remain undefined. Editors Guild of India has exactly how the law will be implemented, it gives the power to interpret what the facts are to the government. The Editors Guild of India has called this self-appointed fact-check “draconian” as it obliges social media platforms to not carry news that the government considers “false,” “false,” or “misleading” — all terms that remain undefined. Editors Guild of India has exactly how the law will be implemented, it gives the power to interpret what the facts are to the government. The Editors Guild of India has called this self-appointed fact-check “draconian” as it obliges social media platforms to not carry news that the government considers “false,” “false,” or “misleading” — all terms that remain undefined.
In the wake of a brutal civil war, exiled Syrian journalists have carved out space in this Turkish city for their independent newsrooms.

BY STEFANIA D’IGNOTTI
THE OUTDOOR TABLES of Kafka Kültür Internet Cafe are covered with piles of empty teacups and ashtrays full of half-smoked cigarettes.

Several customers sit and open their laptops, while the chattering and gentle sounds of typing on keyboards and phones vibrating make it almost look like a newsroom.

Despite its Turkish name, many Syrian journalists in Gaziantep know the place by its Arabic nickname Ayen Amak — the name of a popular cafe in the province of Idlib, the last-standing area in Syria not controlled by the Assad regime. The two cafes are similar, sharing the same atmosphere, drink menu, and outside view on a bustling shopping street.

It’s here that almost every day Abedalbaset al-Hasan spends several hours working on his video reports for Syria TV, a popular Syrian news channel now headquartered in Turkey.

“I didn’t have anyone to teach me [video journalism], but in Gaziantep there is a community where we all teach and learn from each other,” says al-Hasan, 27, as he sips his third cup of Turkish çay of the day while editing news segments on Adobe Premiere about the recent earthquake that struck Turkey.

It’s thanks to the connections he made at this cafe that about 18 months ago he found his current job as a cameraman and began covering Syrian social issues like the conditions in refugee camps and economic struggles of displaced Syrian citizens from the relative safety of Turkey.

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) reports that hundreds of Syrian journalists have been killed and harassed by the Assad regime and armed groups since the beginning of the conflict in 2011. According to the Syrian Journalists Association, which has more than 300 members, only a handful of them still operate in Syria, one of the most dangerous countries in the world for this profession.

In its latest press freedom report, RSF ranked Syria 175th out of 180 countries in the world for press freedom. Many — if not most — of the media outlets in Syria are controlled by the Assad regime and the ruling Baath party, and journalists are subject to prosecution under a new cybercrime law that prohibits, “spreading false news online that damages the prestige of the nation,” according to RSF. Just last year, the organization...
reported that in Syria three journalists were killed and 24 journalists and two media workers were imprisoned. Because of these dire conditions, independent Syrian journalists have fled their home country, many escaping to Turkey because of the close proximity and what at first was a relatively welcoming reception from the Turkish government. These journalists are providing crucial, independent reporting on everything from the Syrian civil war to Covid 19 precautions to the mental health issues and Turkish politics...
Turkey and Greece. After speaking to them and asking them for videos to confirm their story, Aleppo Today geo-located their exact location and contacted human rights organizations, which led to their rescue. Ibrahim al-Sabagh, 33, is originally from Damascus and moved to Gaziantep in 2013. When he arrived, he started working as a reporter, first at Radio Harra FM, another Syrian radio and so-called non-partisan outlet that follows Western standards of freedom, both for himself and the Syrian cause. In 2016, the channel’s news director, overseeing a staff of about two dozen people, “It was a way to put my skills to the service of my country, keep the connection to my homeland and contribute to informing my fellow people back home, as well as my community here in Turkey,” he says of his work.

Sabagh says it’s reporters like these that allow reporters to feel a connection to the Syrian people and help them appreciate their mission. Part of their art is to be a watchdog of Syrian NGOs, says Chawaf. “That’s why we focus on a solution journalism approach.”

By the end of 2014, the radio built a network of over two dozen correspondents who would go back and forth between Syria and Turkey. Those in Syria would send their reporting to the newsroom in Turkey through encryption software, Skype, fake Facebook accounts, or chat that they erased so as not to leave any trace. The reporting was then produced and edited in Gaziantep and streamed and broadcasted via FM radio to reach its audience of about 10 million online listeners and millions over the airwaves — 60 percent of whom live in Syria and Turkey. The station has covered stories like domestic abuse cases among Syrian families in Turkey, the environmental impact caused by the armed conflict, and weapons on Syria’s agricultural lands, trees, and soil. Rozana also translates its work into English to help Western audiences understand the reality of the upheaval in Syria.

Apart from being Rozana’s executive director, Chawaf also has her own program called “Stigma,” which explores mental health abuses in the wider Middle East. The podcast, which has 15 episodes, has helped individu- als find the support they need. For example, the program helped a woman realize that she was the victim of domestic abuse and connected her with the right lawyer to receive legal assistance. The woman later joined Rozana as a staff journalist. “I want listeners to hear about politics anymore. They want programs about everyday needs, like how to live in Turkey and access services,” explains Chawaf. “That’s why we focus on a solution journalism approach.”

What Syrian journalists hope to achieve in Gaziantep is the impact they wouldn’t otherwise be able to achieve back home. Nezhat Shaheen, a producer at Syria TV’s Aleppo Today, where he started as an assistant producer of several of its programs. Today, he’s the channel’s news director, overseeing a staff of about two dozen people. “It was a way to put my skills to the service of my country, keep the connection to my homeland and contribute to informing my fellow people back home, as well as my community here in Turkey,” he says of his work.

One of the most important programs at Aleppo Today was born amid the early days of the revolution as one of the few independent radio channels. At first, its reporters would move back and forth across the border between Syria and Turkey, but when Turkish authorities closed it, and with heightened threats from the Syrian regime, the staff moved permanently to its current headquarters in Gaziantep, though a few adminis- trators are based in Paris. “Here we don’t have too much control from Turkish authorities on our content,” she explains from her 15-person newsroom with two aquamarine-walled broadcast booths and linoleum floors. It’s located on the second floor of a recently restored building, just a few blocks from Ninar Press. Although she recognizes Turkey’s very real fault lines on press freedom issues and the limits they have as Syrians to cover certain top- ics, “it’s definitely a big improvement compared to what we would face if we were still be based in Syria.”

In Gaziantep, journalists also have more access to humanitarian workers and agencies, making it easier to be a watchdog of Syrian NGOs, says Chawaf. “That’s why we focus on a solution journalism approach.”

“LISTENERS DON’T WANT TO HEAR ABOUT POLITICS ANYMORE. THEY WANT PROGRAMS ABOUT EVERYDAY NEEDS”

“The majority of his staff have second jobs. Aghi was a researcher for think tanks, but that was the compromise he made to stay afloat and join the effort to contribute to a free Syrian press. Despite not receiving an owner’s role as editor in chief, he sees it as a mis- sion, both for himself and the Syrian cause. “Of course, there’s no press freedom like Europe,” he says. “But no one here bothers Syrians specifically for what we report on, and that’s more than enough.”

“He Syrian Press” has been financially strug- gling over the past few years, as attention has shifted away from the civil war and destruc- tion, and funds for the outlets in Gaziantep have overall been shrinking, according to many of the journalists interviewed for this story. Each newsroom relies on a different business model to make ends meet. Channels like Syria TV and Aleppo Today are funded by private owners (a Qatari compa- ny and an anonymous anti-Assad Syrian businessman, respectively) while others — like Radio Rozana — prefer to apply for funds and grants from NGOs and European institutes to maintain transparency. “Having an owner means you have to give up on a degree of freedom,” Chawaf says. “We want to be an objective, non-partisan outlet that follows Western standards of press freedom.”

Aleppo Today is affiliated and backed by Syrian opposition offices and its reporting clearly has anti-regime tones. Others like Ninar Press have had to come to terms with the lack of funds and rely on donations from Syrian expats in Europe and the U.S. “Many of our journalists work on a voluntary basis, including me,” Aghi says. “As we opened in 2020, when Covid hit, interest on Syria was at an all-time low. We didn’t have much luck apply- ing for grants.”

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Lina Chawaf, Radio Rozana
Hodding Carter III, a journalist who began his career at his fam-
ily’s newspaper in Greenville, Mississippi, later served in the State
Department under Jimmy Carter, and worked as an Emmy-winning broadcast
journalist and commentator, died on May 11, 2023, in Chapel Hill, N.C. He was 88.

A Nieman Fellow in the class of 1966, Carter was the son of Hodding Carter
Jr. who also studied at Harvard as a 1940 Nieman Fellow and won the 1946 Pulitzer Prize
for editorials about racial, religious, and economic intolerance.

William Hodding Carter III was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, in 1940 and moved to
Washington to become assistant secretary of state for public affairs under Cyrus
Vance. In that role, he gained national recognition as chief spokesman during the
lengthy Iran hostage crisis, giving updates on the situation during televised briefings.

It was Carter who had convinced Vance to allow television cameras into the daily
briefings.

Carter went on to work as a broadcast journalist, first as an anchor for “Inside
Story” a media analysis program on PBS, where he won four Emmy Awards and an
Edward R. Murrow Award, and later in a variety of roles for public affairs shows on
PBS, ABC, CBS, CNN, and the BBC.

From 1985 to 1998, he served as president and chairman of MainStreet,
a TV production company that specialized in public affairs television, and was a

Carter took on a new role as president and CEO of the John S. and James L.
Knight Foundation in 1998. During his tenure, he helped the organization’s
endowment grow to almost $2 billion and significantly increased its grants to
journalists and news organizations.

Carter is survived by his wife, four children, Hodding Carter IV, Catherine
Carter Sullivan, Margaret Carter Joseph, and Finn Carter; three stepchildren, Mike
Derian, Craig Derian, and Brooke Derian; a brother, Philip, also a journalist; and 12
grandchildren.

Hodding Carter III served in the State Department during Jimmy Carter’s administration

The assistant secretary of state for public affairs during the Iran hostage

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Meet the 2024 Nieman fellows

Manasseh Azure Awuni, editor-in-chief of The Fourth Estate, a nonprofit investigative journalism project of the Media Foundation for West Africa in Ghana, will research sustainable funding and managerial models for nonprofit newsrooms in Africa, where press freedom is increasingly threatened.

James Barragán, a politics reporter for The Texas Tribune, will study the deterioration of traditional democratic norms in the U.S., such as press access to government officials and proceedings, the impact that has on the availability of reliable information, and the dangers posed by those who benefit from the rollbacks.

Julia Barton, vice president and executive editor at Pushkin Industries in New York, will study the history of rhetoric, audio, and spoken-word forms, from speech writing to sermons to film, with a focus on the cultural history of narrative conventions in the U.S. and the role of radio in movements for social change.

Julian Benbow, a sports reporter at The Boston Globe, will study data science and data visualization to help interpret and present the data fueling sports and sports coverage, as well as parallels between athleticism and art.

Elsie Chen, a Chinese reporter based in Shenzhen, China, who has worked as a reporter and researcher for The New York Times in Beijing and Seoul, will study the work of independent journalism within social movements. Immediately following her studies at Harvard, Chen will begin a nine-month reporting fellowship with The Associated Press as part of a new Nieman-AP partnership supported by Schmidt Futures. The goal of the program is to provide journalists with China expertise the chance to sharpen their skills and enhance their coverage of China and U.S.-China policy issues.

Ren Curtis, a photojournalist and East Africa bureau chief for The Associated Press in Kenya, will study mental health issues arising from conflict and other traumatic events, focusing on psychology, neuroscience, and PTSD, and the impact of these issues on journalism.

Lebo Diseko, a South African correspondent for the BBC World Service based in London, will study how journalists can adapt to and help protect democracy from the rising threats of post-truth politics, populism, and polarization, with a focus on new ways to engage audiences.

Sonya Groysman, a Russian reporter for TV Rain, documentary director, and co-host of the podcast “Hello, You’re a Foreign Agent” who works in exile, will study how journalism can help those individuals build community and maintain connections to their cultural identity.

Denise Hruby, an Austrian environment reporter who writes for The New York Times, The Washington Post, and National Geographic, will study how journalists can improve reporting on climate change and biodiversity to better inform solutions to the planet’s problems. She will share her findings in a digital handbook, workshops, and a curriculum that will train other journalists and students.

Beandrea July, an independent arts journalist and film critic based in Los Angeles, will study the social impact of the racial empathy gap in movies and on television and the role journalists can play in bridging that gap.

Jikyung Kim, deputy editor, anchor, and writer at the Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) in South Korea, will examine ethical standards in the digital age for reporting on stories about suffering.

Ilya Marritz, a New York-based reporter who covers threats to democracy for ProPublica and Trump legal matters for NPR, will study the forces that are governments in Latin America, how they differ from those who governed the region during the first decade of the 21st century, and their relationship with the media. Lafuente is based in Mexico City.

Yana Lyushnevskaya, a senior journalist with BBC Monitoring’s team in Kyiv, will study how media in conflict-torn countries can transition from war to peace and contribute to creating a post-war media environment that is free, diverse, and pluralistic.

Cristela Guerra

Cristela Guerra, senior arts and culture reporter at WBUR in Boston, will examine stories from the diaspora, including those of her own Panamanian heritage, the reasons that compel people to migrate, and how those individuals build heritage, the reasons that compel people to migrate, and how those individuals build community and maintain connections to their cultural identity.

Javier Lafuente, deputy managing editor of the American edition of the Spanish newspaper El País, will study the evolution of new left-wing movements in Europe, how those individuals build community and maintain connections to their cultural identity.
How a Trip to Angola Helped One Reporter Tell the Story of Race in America

Deborah Barfield Berry, NF '23, on covering slavery, the Civil Rights Movement, and the murder of George Floyd

The trip to Angola was an indelible journey. It wasn’t the first time I had traveled to Africa, but this trip was different.

I was there as a journalist. I was there on a mission. It wasn’t about me taking a pilgrimage like my first trip to the Motherland. It was about telling our story — the African American story, the American story — the best I could.

It also helped make clear why I do what I do, what drives me to tell stories of the often overlooked.

It was 2019, and I was pulled into working on USA Today’s project marking the 400th anniversary of the first enslaved Africans brought to the English colonies in 1619 in what would become the United States. We weren’t the only news organization writing about 1619. But we did something different. Our editors sent a team to Angola, to where that slave ship had traveled to Africa, but this trip was different.

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In addition to me, there was photographer Jarrad Henderson, editor Nichelle Smith, features editor Kelley Beshir French, and Wanda Tucker, whose family members believe they are descendants of those first Africans brought to the English colony. Our task was to chronicle Wanda’s journey in search of her ancestor’s path. That Angola trip took my passion for journalism to another level. I walked where enslaved Africans would have walked. Visited villages where they would have lived. I learned you can be more connected to a story than you know. I had roots there — and with Wanda.

While I’ve covered everything from sports to oil spills, my passion, what drives me, was — is — writing about marginalized communities, shining a light on the wrongs, and sometimes the rights, happening to them. But I learned early in my career that often I would be one of a few people of color in the newsroom. When I landed my first job at the Star-Democrat, a small newspaper on the eastern shore of Maryland, in the mid-1980s, I was only the second Black reporter to work there. At the job there were still few Black reporters. Same with the next job and the next. I had come to expect it but never got used to it. I used to wonder how Black journalists before me, especially the women, braved these all-white, mostly newsrooms during Jim Crow. I have much respect for those who paved the way.

It matters that people of color are in newsrooms. I wrote early on about how experts predicted communities of color would be disproportionately impacted by Covid-19. I hated that that story was right. Then came the murder of George Floyd and another vicious cycle of writing about injustices. I was angry — still am. I wrote about some of these same issues 10 years ago, 20 years ago, 30 years ago. And there are still plenty more disparities and injustices to write about.

Last year came an opportunity to pitch a passion civil rights project. For years, I’ve interviewed civil rights veterans about their work in the ‘60s — powerful stories about trying to register Black voters in hostile communities, about trying to eat at restaurants, about trying to send their kids to better equipped schools. They’d talk about being beaten and jailing and learning activists had been killed. It was dangerous. Still, they did it. As years passed, they were dying off.

In 2021, editors at USA Today put resources behind the civil rights project “Seven Days of 1961” — graphics, photos, video, podcast, and even the augmented reality team, which created an app that sends viewers one of the Freedom Rider buses. Reporters, including me, and photographer Jasper Colt spent months interviewing and vetting sources at the courthouse, the jail, the lunch counter where they protested 60 years ago. I was moved when a Black youth who grew up in that very courthouse where I grew up, a 20-something, said to me, “Journalism is the first draft of history. You and your colleagues at USA TODAY are showing that good journalism can do the rewrites too, when the first couple of drafts get it wrong.”

I’m still one of a few people of color in the newsroom, but I’m still excited about what I do. And it’s not lost on me that this Black woman, a descendant of enslaved people, is a Nieman Fellow at Harvard. I will continue to use my platform. It can be lonely sometimes, especially if you have to fight to make sure other views are included, fight to push back against stereotypes, fight to make sure a story is done right — or, hell, done at all. It also matters that everyone in the newsroom includes diverse voices in their stories and cover communities of color.

That’s one way for journalists to get the story of race in America right.
August 2014, I was on assignment for TIME to cover the rapid advance of Islamic State fighters from Syria into parts of northern Iraq. Their advance had forced the mass exodus of the local Yazidi population, a religious minority that has lived in this border region for centuries. Threatened with genocide and surrounded on three sides, thousands of Yazidis sought refuge in Mount Sinjar, a mountain range with interconnecting valleys that has offered them a natural sanctuary during past periods of conflict.

I boarded a worn-out Iraqi Air Force helicopter for the dangerous 40-minute flight across Islamic State territory. The mission was to deliver bottled water, bread, bananas, and hygiene kits to the thousands of helpless Yazidis stranded on Mount Sinjar and pick up a small group of sick children and elderly people in need of immediate medical attention.

Mount Sinjar is a spectacular sight, surging skywards, abruptly, amid the vast desert badlands that separate Syria and Iraq. As we flew lower toward the landing zone, the scale of the tragedy became apparent. Hundreds of miniature figures dotted the bare mountain top, some of them motionless, others running in our general direction, their faces and desperate gestures calling for help and coming into focus as the helicopter set down in a storm of noise and dust.

Upon landing, a crowd surged towards the helicopter, and I jumped off and started taking pictures of the drama unfolding. Desperate women holding on to their infants, an old man on crutches, several unaccompanied children, and more than a dozen others pushed their way past the crew and into the helicopter. The crew forced some off at gun point, but unable to keep the situation under control, the pilots ordered their men to abort the mission and prepare for a hasty lift-off. I fought my way back inside the helicopter and managed to stand on a bench holding on to the fuselage, struggling to keep my balance while photographing the chaotic situation around us.

Then suddenly, seconds after we were airborne, the chopper banked hard to the side and crashed on the mountain ravine, unable to handle the weight of too many passengers. I do not remember the precise moment of impact, all my senses were focused on taking pictures amid the deafening noise of the chopper rotors.

Immediately after the crash, I opened my eyes, and it was dark and silent. It took me another second to realize that I was alive, but stuck and unable to move under a pile of people. This is the moment when I was faced with the fear of a suffocating death, until minutes later someone started pulling the bodies on top of me and pulled me out from the wreckage.

I took this photograph aboard a second helicopter that came to our rescue a couple of hours after the crash. In this image, wounded survivors of the crash sit next to the bodies of four people, including one of the pilots of the doomed helicopter, as they are flown back to a base for medical attention. Here, I was thrust into two roles at once — journalist and human being affected by the war’s danger and violence. After getting over the shock of the crash and realizing that I was OK, I sprang into action to document the scene. This is an example of a change in my work that was forced upon me by circumstance. I hope that my photographs of this event convey not just the gory details of the crash but also the human dignity of the Iraqis most affected by the conflict.

Though news from Iraq has faded from the front pages of most Western news outlets and the threat from ISIS has diminished, sectarian violence continues. In the decade since I took this photograph, thousands of Yazidis remain internally displaced, as the situation in Iraq continues to challenge their sense of security. In that time, I also became interested in capturing the personal and familial histories of Iraqis as well as the history of the country itself. I turned away from the spectacle produced at the moment of violence to its aftermath — quieter moments defined by nuance and ambiguity. In these photos, I often tried to center the humanity and resilience of the people in the images, to give face to Iraqis who lived and still live every day with the immense challenges of insecurity, violence, and poverty, and to make visible the political action and demands of a new generation of Iraqis. For me, it’s about giving voice to those who are fighting to break with this past.