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RIDING THE A.I. WAVE

HOW NEWSROOMS
CAN HARNESS THE POWER OF
ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE



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Abedalbasat al-Hasan, a cameraman for the popular news outlet Syria TV, works on his video reports out of an internet cafe in Gaziantep

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With surveillance on the rise, reporters are taking extra precautions to protect sources

COVER: BRIAN STAUFFER; ABOVE: ABDULSALAM JARROUD; RIGHT: HOKYOUNG KIM

Tending to the Details

As newsrooms hollow out and deepfakes become more prevalent, the need for mentors is greater than ever

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 searing 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 widely among journalists, mourned the disappearing camaraderie that work-from-home habits and slimmed-down newsrooms have wrought. "I worry that the romance, the alchemy, is gone," she wrote. I worry too, but about the loss of mentoring, those relationships between the novice and the experienced that are vanishing along with public editors, copy desks, and other editing safeguards once thought fundamental to journalism.

As editing ranks shrink, the stakes rise. Deepfakes and artificial intelligence manipulations pose threats to journalistic

credibility that well exceed my spelling errors. The industry needs new protections, including more editors trained in oversight of the emerging technologies.

"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 eulogist 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 Winnepesaukee in a story about Winnepesaukee," 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

“
The industry needs new protections, including more editors trained in oversight of emerging technologies



Concord Monitor editor Mike Pride leads an editorial board interview with then-presidential candidate Barack Obama

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 comic neurosis 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 30,000-word “Secret History of Family Separation” story for The Atlantic.

Previously, 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 bureaucracy in the “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 about as bad a reputation as any concept can have. Bureaucracy equals bad equals wasted time and pushed papers. It conjures people who don’t want to get anything done.

That’s, in fact, the main issue the Trump administration had with bureaucracy and why they decided to, as much as possible, get rid of it.

I set out to learn about it and discovered that bureaucracy shouldn’t have the reputation that it does — especially when you’re dealing with something as big as the United States government. These 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 battled 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? How is the public going to react? What are the political implications? Only after it’s been vetted by people who have all this expertise does it reach 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



You just don’t forget being on the phone with a parent and they’re begging you for help finding their daughter

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.

Law 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 detention 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 at all whatsoever. In fact, it’s possible that the audio was even more powerful than video might have been. If you had video of people having their children taken away, that would’ve broken through. What the audio had going for it is that kids who are crying more or less all sound the same.

In this case, these kids were speaking another language, but there was something very raw and elemental and universally gripping about the sounds of the children crying and asking — begging — to be



Caitlin Dickerson spoke about her family separation investigation at the Nieman Foundation

brought back together with their parents, for information about where their parents were, just for information about what was going on.

I started out working [at] NPR. I’ve always felt strongly about the power of the sound of the human voice. It just conveys something that no other medium can. In this case, it was especially helpful because of the kind of othering effect of journalism that has to do with immigration ... [and] 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 until the audio of those children cut through the noise and the euphemisms and the obfuscation and what was happening, and the stakes of it just became undeniably 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.

Immigration issues can’t be solved in a four-year term. Politicians think about success and deliverables at the end of their administration, which hopefully, in their mind, leads to reelection. If you can’t fix the issue, you just see both parties reverting to, “The damage being done to my reputation, how can I minimize that as much as possible?”

That’s why we keep going back to the Band-Aid solutions, because it’s all about minimizing the damage and political blowback, as opposed to fixing things, because that would require taking a risk that could carry consequences and could lose reelection.

On crafting the right lede

I started this story with a series of social workers who were having kids dropped in their laps and not knowing who they were or where they came from. I was always moved by the perspectives of the social workers. Why is that? They had the hardest evidence that separations were taking place apart from the parents and the kids themselves who, clearly, people didn’t believe.

I was also interested in coming back to the father who’s at the end of the lede now, Nazario, who is one of the first, if not the first, parent who I spoke to in depth, who was separated from his daughter at the time. You just don’t forget being on the phone with a parent and they’re begging you for help finding their daughter.

I was trying to interview him about his child so that I could write a compelling story about their family. It was like my questions weren’t penetrating. He just came back to asking me again and again, “Do you know where she is? When do you think she might be able to come back?” He couldn’t take in anything other than, “Where is my daughter? When do I get her?”

I was torn between whether to start with Nazario or whether to start with the case worker. I called [my editor] up and said, “I really don’t know what to do because I think these are both the right ledes to start,” and he just said, “How about both?”

That’s why I ended up splitting them, which is such an Atlantic thing. And it’s a magazine thing more than a newspaper thing in that when you’re writing for the newspaper, you have to pick a lede. You don’t get to play around with the limited space. I really loved doing that.■

LISA ABITFOL



Members of the San Carlos Apache Nation protest a bill that would turn over parts of the sacred Oak Flat to a copper mining company

NIEMANS
@WORK

Covering Climate as an Indigenous Affairs Beat

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

Think about this metaphor from Indigenous and disabled climate justice expert Kera Sherwood-O'Regan (Kāi Tahu): Climate change is like a tabletop, 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] upholds 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 invert that idea, covering climate and the environment as 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 there are no 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; 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 is one 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 means doing work that 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 weaved 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

It was December 2016, and my daughter Luciana and I were sitting in an outdoor jacuzzi 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 40 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 quirky detective solved the mystery. I figured readers would know who had won the game but would want to turn the page to learn 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. ■

BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

CARL VITI/AP PHOTO



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

Sally Kestin (previous spread) planned to write a novel in her retirement. She now works on The Asheville Watchdog, a project that arose from a meeting of fellow retired journalists on her back deck (right)



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 retired 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” — masks the impact it’s had since it was founded in 2020, after Gannett sold the Citizen-Times’s building and cut its staff from 75 to about 10. 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 onetime 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 editorial 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 dismay that what we devoted our lives to has been abandoned, particularly in smaller towns,” says Rowe, whose colleagues in the project include Journal alums Jim Carberry, Tom Herman, Joann Lublin, Janet Guyon, 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 is 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 Roessner, retired Pulitzer Prize-winning former managing editor of The Hartford Courant who now serves as editor of The New Bedford Light in Massachusetts. The

KHADEJEH NIKOUYEH

The Gannett-owned daily in New Bedford, Massachusetts, has been decimated by budget cuts. The New Bedford Light, edited by Barbara Roessner, retired managing editor of the Hartford Courant, hopes to fill the gap

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-lined 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 Gremillion. The Watchdog's total revenue in 2021, the year last for which the figure is available, was \$98,833, 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 sites in their longtime or adopted hometowns. Ed Friedrich, who retired after a career as a local sportswriter, 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 allegation 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, say 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 Boisfeuillet "Bo" Jones Jr., former publisher and chief executive officer at The Washington Post and former president and CEO of Macneil/Lehrer Productions. He's part of a group that took over the Fauquier 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 deadline pressures, intersects with both an acceleration of retirement and changes in the way Americans approach it.

People in all kinds of fields moved up their retirements in response to Covid-19 and its effects on the labor market. Some 3.5 million who were 55 and older left the workforce in 2020 and 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.

Newsroom employment dropped from 114,000 to 85,000 from 2008 to 2020, Pew says, while the consulting firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas reports that yet another 3,300 jobs were cut in 2021 and 2022. As 2023 began, another 75 people were laid off by NBC News and MSNBC, 130 by Vox Media, and 20 by The Washington Post.

"So often in journalism today, your last job involves a layoff or a buyout, and it's just such a terrible way to end your career. So I'm just so happy that there are places where people can continue," says Kim Kleman, executive director of Report for America.

Still more journalists are also nearing retirement: About a quarter remaining in newsrooms are 55 and older, according to Pew.

"Journalists are being pushed out of their jobs, forced to retire, retiring earlier than they wanted to — the point is, there are a lot of journalists out there who left what they thought would be forever jobs. And they're not ready to do nothing," says Rose Ciotta, founder and executive director of the Investigative Editing Corps, which pays journalists, including some retirees, up to \$10,000 stipends to help local news outlets with six-month investigative projects. Among the problems these have exposed: how county jails in Maine were illegally recording calls between inmates and their attorneys; evictions of tenants from public housing in Toledo, Ohio, for past-due balances of as little as \$100; neglect of rural Latinos during recovery efforts after hurricanes in eastern North Carolina; and government oversight failures at nursing homes in Indiana with high numbers of deaths from Covid-19. For many baby boomers, retirement has new meaning. While they may have left the places where they spent the bulk of their careers, more than a quarter of people aged 65 to 74 still work in some capacity, the Bureau of Labor Statistics says — a proportion expected to rise to nearly a third by 2031.

"I refuse to say that I've retired," says Karin Winner, former editor of The San Diego Union-Tribune, who at 78 serves on the board of the San Diego nonprofit inewsource. "It's not true for me, and I don't think it's true for many journalists."

Mark Wert, who retired in December after working as an investigative and enterprise reporter and editor at The Cincinnati Enquirer is now mentoring young Report for America journalists. He says he's "trying to find a new

Gig Harbor Now board members discuss the future of the outlet. Ed Friedrich, who retired after a career as a local sportswriter, helped start up Gig Harbor Now after Gannett shut down the weekly in the region



rhythm in life after 45 years of being a daily journalist.”

“I don’t think ‘jarring’ is too strong a word,” Wert, who is 68, says of his retirement. “To stay in the business that long, you have to be perhaps 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 of these former journalists say they tried other things before they drifted back into the fold. When they retired to Asheville, Kestin and Gremillion volunteered at a food bank, packing potatoes and cans of beans, but eventually realized they could contribute more through journalism.

Kestin, who is 58 and a former investigative reporter at The Sarasota Herald-Tribune, The Tampa Tribune, and The South Florida Sun-Sentinel, planned to write a novel. “After 30 years I had this vision of sitting around in my flannel pajamas and making up shit after 30 years of agonizing over every word in a sentence and worrying if I was going to get sued. And that lasted all of a couple of years.” Roessner, in New Bedford, also “really didn’t intend to be doing this. I intended to walk by the beach and 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 cutting 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 Fiedler, 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 them, ‘Why?’” says Fiedler, who is 77, “It’s both that sense of wonder and questioning and demanding to know answers. You don’t just shed that when you qualify for Social Security.”

Some say they feared being bored after high-paced, high-powered careers. “I love my grandchildren, but they can’t have a conversation with me every day about the nuances of the First Amendment,” says Richard Griffiths, retired senior editorial director and vice president for CNN Worldwide and a onetime producer for CBS News who now serves as president of the Georgia First Amendment Foundation.

There are downsides to doing this kind of journalism in retirement. A lot of it entails raising money, which is a skill retired journalists don’t necessarily have, for instance. “After a lifetime of asking nasty questions, I’m trying to learn how to ask nicely,” Robinson says. Griffiths, who’s also involved in a nonprofit news site in Clayton, Georgia, called The Clayton Crescent, says that what startups really need is not just retired journalists, but retired accountants, fundraisers, and salespeople. The Crescent was started by Robin Kemp, a reporter who, with most of her colleagues, was laid off during Covid by the existing local paper; it was fueled by an influx of more than \$40,000 in crowdfunded donations after Clayton County became a hot spot in the 2020 presidential election. Griffiths agreed to head the board.

Another complicating factor is that many news des-

erts are not in affluent communities where people often move in their retirement, such as Asheville, Gig Harbor, or Marblehead, but are in far-flung rural areas.

Nor do journalists who pull out their notebooks in even those well-heeled towns and cities always get fond welcomes. “It hasn’t all been warm and fuzzy,” says Kestin, who has heard the word “carpetbaggers” thrown at her and her colleagues. In an increasingly litigious landscape, some organizations staffed all or in part by retired journalists also worry about legal liability, especially when investigative reporting is involved. None appear to have been sued, but the former Wall Street Journal staffers who are setting up the Local News Advisory Team are budgeting for liability insurance. It’s pretty much the only significant expense the group anticipates, in addition to stipends for the coaches and a small salary for an administrator. The Investigative Editing Corps requires partner publications to add its editors and coaches to their insurance policies.

Not everyone who’s retired from journalism wants to go back to it. The members of the Asheville team reached out to many other retired journalists in the area and found their own desire to fill the local journalism vacuum wasn’t necessarily “a universal driving force,” says Watchdog managing editor Peter Lewis, a former New York Times senior writer and editor. Many of the people who have decided to spend at least some of their retirements continuing to work in journalism say it takes more time than they expected. Lewis, who is 71, says he and Kestin both work more than full time. Retirees can’t do that forever, he says. “We are a certain age, and the siren song of retirement does sound loudly in the hills here,” he says.

The idea, say Lewis and others, is to gradually train younger journalists to succeed them. Many nonprofit news sites have begun to hire editors and reporters. “We think we can eventually replace ourselves with a full-time paid staff,” says Lewis. “Our overarching goal was to establish a foundation for journalism that will outlive us and to do that we need to pass on our knowledge.”

That’s the part of what they do that most of these retired journalists say they find to be the most rewarding. Long a profession based on apprenticeship, journalism was a place where knowledge was passed on to the newest hires by editors and more experienced coworkers. But there are fewer and fewer of those in gutted newsrooms, and many physical newsrooms have themselves been shut down in favor of remote work, even as the single largest share of newsroom workers are now aged 18 to 34, according to Pew.

“Whether you went to journalism school or not, you probably learned most of your craft in the newsrooms. And with newsrooms being cut back and cut back, there are a lot of great reporters who haven’t had that kind of mentorship. Now they can tap into this whole pool of people for that kind of knowledge,” says Sue Cross, executive director and CEO of the Institute for Nonprofit News, a network that has grown to include more than 400 organizations.

Retired NPR reporter Tom Gjelten, who at 75 mentors young radio reporters, finds they get surprisingly little of that from their editors. “Whether it’s because [news or-

ganizations] are understaffed or overworked or don’t have the experience to bring to bear, I don’t know.”

Wert was always the guy who would drive new reporters around Cincinnati and make sure they understood its 52 distinct neighborhoods. In his retirement, he plans to do the same thing for interns.

Griffiths takes what he calls his “tent revival” to local newsrooms, where he trains young reporters in how to use Georgia’s open-records and open-meetings laws. He also takes the opportunity to talk about his “not-so-finest hours” — times when he says his “hubris and arrogance got in the way of making a good decision.”

One glaring problem with the mentorship of younger journalists by older ones is that retirees are generally less diverse than the generation they mentor. Newsroom employees have long been more white and male than workers overall, according to Pew. That’s especially true of older journalists and, by extension, retirees. Recent figures show that 85 percent of reporters, editors, photographers, and videographers 50 and older are non-Hispanic whites and two-thirds are men, while half of those 18 to 29 are women and more than a quarter are of a race other than white. More than half of newsroom employees say their newsrooms do not have enough racial and ethnic diversity, and the vast majority of the retirees in the most high-profile mentoring and startup efforts are white. It’s a problem the Local News Advisory Team is trying to address directly. Among the goals laid out in its business plan is: “Figure out how to deal with our whiteness.”

And not everyone is interested in stories about the good old days. That’s one thing Miguel Llanos has found — that younger journalists prefer not to hear that “There used to be something called the copy desk and we had so many tools and resources and there was creativity everywhere. They might get disillusioned,” says Llanos, 63, a retired former Seattle Times and MSNBC journalist who now mentors for Report for America.

For all of these issues, some retirees say they want to do more of this work, not less. “I’m still kind of hanging around like the Maytag repairman,” Robinson jokes. “I sit here and wait for people to call and ask for my advice.”

It could be a movement, Kestin says. “It may not be practical everywhere, but I sure would like to see some other retired journalists stepping up,” she says. “This is our way to give back. It’s just our craft. All we have to do is go and apply the skills we’ve lived and breathed for years.” ■

**“I LOVE MY GRANDCHILDREN,
BUT THEY CAN’T HAVE A
CONVERSATION WITH ME EVERY
DAY ABOUT THE NUANCES OF
THE FIRST AMENDMENT”**

**RICHARD GRIFFITHS, PRESIDENT OF THE
GEORGIA FIRST AMENDMENT FOUNDATION**

PREVIOUS SPREAD: DOMINIC CHAVEZ; ABOVE: LARRY STEAGALL



SMART WAYS JOURNALISTS CAN EXPLOIT ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

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 Ryyänen, 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,” Ryyänen 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

JAANI LAMPINEN/YLE

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

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

AI 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

from Crowdtangle. 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. AI is helping newsrooms reach readers online in new languages and compete on a global scale. 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.



“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 integrity 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 replaced by it lies in understanding how it works and reinforcing the value of the human side of journalism.

AI, NATURAL LANGUAGE PROCESSING, AND JOURNALISM

“Artificial intelligence” is something of a catch-all for advanced algorithms that power everything from web searches to the alerts you get on your phone encouraging you to look 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 that data.

Essentially, it studies billions of examples — say a library of text — and then produces an output based on a prediction of what’s likely to come next.

Ask ChatGPT to describe a bluebird and it will tell you that it’s a small bird with blue feathers, among other facts. Put simply, this answer is the result of computations that check the data the app has been trained on for patterns that match the question posed to it. The program then

synthesizes a response based on a machine-powered understanding of the order letters and words go in. If none of the data ChatGPT was trained on included anything ornithological, it would come up short.

ChatGPT’s training data includes nothing from later than September 2021. Ask it what happened in 2022 and it will give a disclaimer that it doesn’t know, then list a few safe predictions — “climate change continued to be a major issue” — and scheduled events like the Beijing Olympics. Tools like this employ, or fall under the category of, natural language processing (NLP) — AI trained on datasets of human language so it knows not only what a verb is, but where to place one in a sentence, and how to conjugate. This can make the technology feel especially competitive to humans, since it enables computers to communicate in ways we clearly understand. That communication is often quite good and keeps improving.

A chatbot’s writing ability can be impressive, but much of NLP’s power for newsrooms lies in its ability to read. NLP tools can analyze text at a scale beyond human capability. And as Yle and other newsrooms are finding, having a trained machine reader can lead to more human readers as well.

TRANSLATION

Translation is one application of NLP: It may not be the most widespread or most well-publicized, but it shows the power of AI to increase reach and revenue — and also the pitfalls of relying too heavily on machines.

A month before Yle posted its first stories in Ukrainian, French newspaper Le Monde launched its English-language edition. The project began when a re-

porter proposed writing a series of articles on the 2022 French elections in English. Knowing the efficiencies of machine translation, Le Monde considered instead launching a newsletter that would offer 10 to 15 of the more than 100 articles the paper publishes every day translated into English. But given the capacity AI provided, the paper quickly shifted to launching an entire English language edition.

Now, the first element at the top of Le Monde’s homepage is a button to choose between French and English. The English edition offers 40 articles every weekday and 30 each day on Saturday and Sunday. Like Yle’s Ukrainian stories, Le Monde’s English posts are written and edited in the outlet’s native language, then translated to English with AI, and reviewed by an editor before publishing. The process is called machine translation post-editing (MTPE), and it enables a small group of humans to do the work of many.

“If there were only the seven journalists currently working on the project writing [English-language] stories, we would publish maybe one to five” a day, Le Monde English editor Elvire Camus says. But using AI doesn’t mean the process is easy. The paper takes several human-centered steps to not only ensure the translations are accurate, but to check context, cultural literacy, and preserve the editorial style Le Monde has been building for about eight decades. “The system is quite heavy,” Camus says.

Le Monde partners with two outside firms that specialize in MTPE to undertake these translations, one of which is TranslationServices.com. When Translation Services gets its articles from Le Monde, it runs them through DeepL, an AI translation program. This tool doesn’t just translate word-by-word like a human flipping through a dictionary. It connects phrases and context among words. But the tool isn’t yet advanced enough to produce translations that Le Monde would run without review. “We want to make sure that what we publish in English is as good as what we publish in French,” Camus says.

The post editors Translation Services employs are

plains these differences and helps streamline the review of machine translations. “The style guide has grown and grown,” Palder says. “And that’s really reflective of the fact that AI helps us get the job done, but at least for the foreseeable future, there is always going to be ... a human in the loop, as machine learning folks sometimes say.”

After DeepL and the post editor, a story gets one more review by a Le Monde editor. By the time a story lands on the English homepage, it’s been through four pairs of eyes and one AI program, Camus says.

Translation Services tries to keep the same people on the team editing Le Monde — which is spread around the 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 coded into the translation software, so the machine knows to translate a certain idiom a certain way, or to space em dashes appropriately.

This 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 overlapping languages. 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 news should be silenced by language,” Palder says, noting there may come a time when news outlets don’t feel the need to have a human review of 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 2025. Camus declined to share current subscriber numbers but said growth for



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

veterans of government offices or French literature scholars who do more than check that the translation is technically correct. There are punctuation discrepancies and cultural differences, like describing French municipalities. In addition, “the literary flair is lost, often,” says Luke Palder, chief executive officer of Translation Services, and certain concepts might need more explanation for an audience outside of France. “You would never explain who Nicolas Sarkozy is in French, but to an English audience, you would sometimes need to say he’s the former president,” Camus says.

Le Monde has a stylebook for translators that ex-

the English service has been steady, if modest. The name Le Monde carries more weight in the French-speaking world; launching a translated service aimed at readers with no previous relationship to the paper is like launching an entirely new publication, albeit one with a much larger potential audience. English is the most-spoken language in the world; there are over a billion more people who understand it than understand French. Le Monde sees its competitors as the BBC, The New York Times, and The Washington Post. AI’s efficiency has enabled them to begin to compete with these other global, English-language publications in terms of scale.

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 ChatGPT and less complicated than MTPE. Apps like Grammarly, for instance, scan texts for grammatical errors and suggest ways to avoid phrasing that's technically correct but might be stylistically undesirable, such as passive voice or awkward syntax.

By using AI tools 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 experience for the paper. That personalization, they decided, would be done by AI, while the paper's other newsletters were curated by editors.



By using AI tools to analyze news articles, rather than translate or write them, journalists can gain a better understanding of the work they do

For automation, the paper turned to the Belgium-based firm Twipe, which offers publishers newsletters that are curated and sent entirely by a machine. Twipe's 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 popular 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 groups them into categories based on patterns of how words are used, finding trends that might elude a human editor or go overlooked in a manual tagging process.

In addition to studying a publisher's archive, Twipe analyzes the stories a reader has clicked on while logged into their account. It then matches that user's history to its machine-created topics. The resulting newsletter

is a mix of these recommendations and stories that are trending more broadly across the publisher's website. "That ensures that you don't go into things like filter bubbles, because you're still getting the same main stories of the day or the key stories that you should know, alongside things which are kind of personal interest stories," says Matthew Lynes, former content marketing lead at Twipe. (Lynes left the company in March.)

Currently, some 50,000 Atlanta Journal-Constitution subscribers are getting a daily afternoon email that's been put together and sent entirely by AI, with stories based on their reading history. McGhee says another 50,000 are getting human-curated newsletters. The open rate for the human-curated newsletters is about five percent, while Twipe's emails are six-and-a-half percent. It's small, McGhee acknowledges, but that number has grown over the six months they've tested the emails. And for McGhee, the more encouraging statistic is how engaged readers are with the automated emails. "We've seen about 600 people become more activated," he says.

This means they more regularly open emails and more often click on stories — reading at least 10 per month.

This incremental growth is the result of careful human oversight of AI. Even though Twipe's software can send thousands of custom emails automatically, a team of Journal-Constitution and Twipe staffers closely monitor the project. Dana Nastase, Twipe's head of business 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 newsroom is reaching as wide of 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."

AI's categorizations don't need to stop at topics. The startup Overtone AI has created models to study the relationships between words and paragraphs, and its software can identify how much opinion, original reporting, or aggregation articles include. "Is this a quick update about a car crash with one source that is the police, or is this an in-depth investigation about car crashes that speaks to everyone in the community about how a par-

ticular intersection is ruining their lives?" is an assessment the tool can make, says Christopher Brennan, chief product officer for Overtone. The software gives stories a score that predicts their level of impact. Publishers can then compare that score to their existing analytics to get a sense of not only what topics readers engage with, but what type of story.

"People can understand one article now, anecdotally with their intuition of saying, 'Ah, this sort of article did well on social or this sort of article led to newsletter signups,'" Brennan says. "When you have the help of AI, you can look at hundreds or thousands of articles, and then see, okay, consistently, we see one type of article leads to newsletter subscriptions, or one type of article is what leads to increasing our reach on social."

The Institute for Nonprofit News (INN) — a collection of more than 400 independent newsrooms across the country — uses Overtone to sort the hundreds of stories its partners publish every day. This sorting is helpful for publishers in the collective who might want to share a partner's work with their audience but don't have the time to read every story. The AI categorizes stories by theme and format, and presents a short list of pieces that fit a publisher's criteria for sharing.

"It's the first cut at curation," says Sue Cross, executive director and chief executive officer of INN. The technology winnows down a list of hundreds of stories to a handful in a fraction of the time it would take a human to do so.

In one instance, Overtone labeled a Texas Tribune story on a shortage of maternity care in East Texas as an in-depth enterprise story about rural issues. In early January, INN featured it as its story of the week in its newsletter, putting it in front of readers outside of Texas and 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 identify blind spots in 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 analytics, this means the newsroom 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

Atlanta United forward Josef Martinez celebrates after scoring a goal against the New York Red Bulls. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution turned to AI to send personalized newsletters, matching user history to machine-created topics, like sports



Edward Tian released an app called GPTZero, which assesses the probability that a text was written by AI

alert editors of hateful or aggressive posts in comment sections. Sillanpää says combining it with topic tags and source tracking would lead them “to figure out what kind of terminology is used to discuss certain topics,” possibly identifying unconscious bias in stories.

Sillanpää predicts AI will eventually scan video and audio stories, too, and give Yle’s journalists a more granular view of not only of what they cover, but how. “The main idea is to make our stories better,” Sillanpää says. “We believe that automated ways for analyzing our content are important for building effective methods that can guide our editorial processes.”

Scanning with NLP tools doesn’t need to be limited to content newsrooms produce themselves. This is a use that’s bound to become more vital for journalism as AI grows as a means of generating content online. Kristian Hammond, cofounder of Narrative Science, a company that trains AI to write news, has predicted that 90 percent of news could be written by AI by 2030.

That number is a prediction, but AI-generated content is already filling up our feeds, whether it’s in the form of social media filters that alter our appearance or chatbots that respond to customer service questions. 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 student named Edward Tian released an app called GPTZero, which assesses the probability that a text was written by AI. The tool has applications in classrooms, where teachers might use it to check for students cheating on essays, but Tian has opened it to anyone. A user simply pastes text into a website to get a score of how likely it was the text came from a machine.

Programs like GPTZero 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 those. 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 much faster than any human fact-checker could operate. This would be helpful in steering reporters who want to debunk misinformation, or it could be deployed to reduce the financial incentive for posting 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 stories. The Associated Press uses AI to write updates on corporate earnings reports and sports stories. The BBC has experimented with AI for local election updates. Yle briefly used AI to write sports stories.

AI can write these types of stories because they’re based on known events that produce clear data: Hockey games end in a score, corporations routinely file financial updates, vote tallies are posted publicly. Humans are good at writing these stories, too, but writing them takes time that could be put to use on enterprise and

COURTESY OF EDWARD TIAN



investigative stories — the type of pieces that don’t have clean, publicly posted results.

AI writing doesn’t need to be an all-or-nothing proposal, though. 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. Narrativa, a natural language generation company that works with publishers, created the technology behind a tool The Wall Street Journal uses to help draft stories for reporters by putting together paragraphs on market trends and financial data. “From that starting point, a reporter can layer on analysis and insight — producing a richer story faster,” Alyssa Zeisler, then The Journal’s research and development editor, wrote in 2021. “With the computer focusing on the ‘what,’ our reporters can focus on the ‘why.’”

Certain precautions need to be taken. AI trained on information from across the internet may not have the right information to draft a Wall Street Journal story, and it certainly won’t write like a Wall Street Journal reporter would write. Narrativa’s tool is trained on data from Dow Jones and The Journal’s archives — the paragraphs it writes have the paper’s institutional voice. This also eliminates the question of ownership for a story written by a machine that’s trained on the work of tens of thousands of different people. “Newsrooms should use only their archives if they want to produce their own content and own the [intellectual property],” says David Llorente, Narrativa’s CEO. (OpenAI’s terms require anyone publishing text made with its tool to label it as such.)

Even with this training, Llorente says, AI is best left to helping with paragraphs, not whole stories. “Language models are not knowledge models, and they

should never be used to write stories but rather to help journalists with some tasks,” he says. “People tend to think that models like GPT3 or ChatGPT can be used to write news, and this is not possible. These models are great to perform traditional natural language processing tasks such as summarization, paraphrasing, [and] information extraction.” This is because ChatGPT and others work like aggregators — only finding what already exists, not what has yet to be uncovered. It’s why Narrativa can build AI that writes a paragraph based on public data, but it can’t report out a new story or find information that hasn’t been posted publicly.

Another use for AI in the newsroom could be to summarize stories in order to distribute them in news briefs, newsletters, social media, or on other platforms. This may become more widespread soon. In a survey of local newsrooms published in 2022, The Associated Press found that summarization was among the most-requested AI tools, and the survey mentioned that the AP’s partner, the AI firm Agolo, could not only summa-

rize text, but turn text articles into broadcast scripts, a task many multi-platform newsrooms dedicate several human hours to every day. In these instances, the AI is 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 and giving that audience news they’re likely to want. These tasks include summarization not only of stories, but also of transcripts of government meetings. It includes 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 search-friendly 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.

At Yle, the initial adoption of AI was met with skepticism. “Every time we introduce something like that

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 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. It started with giving the AI a name — Voitto — and representing it with a cartoon of a robot.

“We made up this doll and this figure Voitto and somehow it worked,” he says. If “he’s not so dangerous looking then there’s nothing to be feared.” Silly as it may seem, this façade helps journalists get comfortable working with a new set of tools.

That process starts like it did at Yle, by learning what AI can and can’t do, understanding that it carries the biases of the people who made it, and recognizing that it does the work people ask of it. “The more we understand how those tools operate and the less of a magic box it seems to the people involved, the more we’re able to make some of these decisions in an informed fashion,” says Hashim, the AI and media policy researcher, “as opposed to thinking of an AI as a one stop shop tool that ... solves everything.” ■

‘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





Carlos Martínez, left, and Óscar Martínez on the night they published their story about President Nayib Bukele and his ties to organized crime in El Salvador. El Faro, where the Martínez brothers are reporters, had been targeted with Pegasus spyware between 2020 and 2022

“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 whistleblower 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 around the globe, repressive governments in places like El Salvador, Hungary, and Burma have weaponized the tracking of reporters with an eye to intimidating muckrakers and suppressing critics and free speech advocates. The spying can extend to unearthing, pursuing,

and punishing confidential sources that help journalists break stories.

Bottom line, “In the surveillance age, the more you can stay offline, basically the safer you and your source will be,” says Ela Stapley, digital security advisor for the Committee to Protect Journalists.

While some journalists go to great lengths to follow that advice, 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 tipsters — or try to do so.

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 of the report to the N.S.A.’s media office — with a crease 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, an investigative reporter may be the one under investigation.

Two years ago, a media consortium coordinated by Forbidden Stories and supported by Amnesty 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 counted both 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,



When **Forbes** tech reporter Emily Baker-White found out last year that ByteDance, the controversial China-based firm that runs the video-sharing platform TikTok, had used the app to track her whereabouts as she covered the company, she knew she was on to a major story. And she was worried — but not necessarily about herself. The “theory” behind the tracking, she says, was to cross-reference her locations with those of TikTok employees to see who might be talking to her.

LISETTE POOLE/LA TIMES

or did not have the tech knowledge in order to be able to respond safely,” CPJ’s Stapley says. “Journalists are lacking training in how to manage sensitive communications with possible whistleblowers and also [on] receiving of documents.”

Today, many more outlets provide that training to reporters — and publicize secure contact methods for tipsters.

“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”

NELSON RAUDA, A REPORTER FOR EL FARO

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 that you don’t normally frequent.” The system gives sources a codename no one else knows — not even The Post.

ProPublica, 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 strongman Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, laid out his “unnerving” experiences with being hacked in a 2021 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, a University of Toronto institute that studies spyware, the identity and motivation of his hackers proved elusive.

“Did they steal my contacts so they could arrest my sources? Comb through my messages to see who I’d talked to? Troll through photos of my family at the beach? Only the hackers knew,” Hubbard wrote. “As far as I know, 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 lose sleep.”

Large, well-funded media outlets with robust security protocols are acutely aware that even the best defenses aren’t impregnable. Much of what they do to try to head off intrusions is also applicable to medium and small outfits 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 [go] 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.

There are practical and relatively easy security measures any reporter can take, she says, such as making sure VPNs are trustworthy and limiting the amount of data you carry around on your devices. Something as simple as completely powering down your mobile — something just four percent of Americans said they did “frequently” in a 2015 Pew study — can remove some forms of spyware from your device.

And reporters may choose encrypted messaging apps 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 phone and when prudent, disable Face ID, so that if someone grabs your cell, they can’t unlock it and get access to everything just by holding it up in front of you.

Broadly, Kapur and other experts advocate for figuring out a risk model and planning accordingly. And a lot of that calculation depends on the subject matter, the location of the reporting, and the sources.

Reporters in Latin America, for example, have long been aware of the dangers of hacking and spying by hostile, secretive governments. “We live looking over our shoulders,” says Nelson Rauda, a reporter for El Faro, the first digital-native news site of El Salvador.

Rauda was already taking myriad measures to secure his information when he found out that he and a score of colleagues had been targeted with the Pegasus spyware between June 2020 and November 2022. “I just felt like a clown,” he says. “All of that — what for, if they were already tapping into our [phones]?”

These days, Rauda stays as offline as he can. “I buy an agenda, like my father does and like my grandfather did, [to log] my appointments, because I feel safer with a notebook that I carry all the time with me than having all of my things in a Google calendar.” When he arranges a face-to-face talk with a source, he keeps the message vague: “I’ll just call them or text them to say, ‘Hey, let’s meet — same time, same place,’ and they already know where.” Now that his phone has been “weaponized” against him, he feels safer not bringing it to source meetings at all.



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 even 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. [We’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 purporting 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 their information,” says Aristegui, recipient of the 2023 IPI-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-

Carmen Aristegui talks about a New York Times story about the spyware the Mexican government used on journalists, June 2017. Between 2015 and 2016, Aristegui received more than 20 NSO texts



tronically, she exercises caution “primarily by trying to maximize direct contact with people face-to-face rather than telephone or email or WhatsApp or anything that could be spied on,” she says.

“We even go to the extreme that when we get together face-to-face, we take all our cell phones and we put them in a box and we put this box inside a refrigerator or a microwave, or we take it somewhere far away from

“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.” But it’s not just foreign malware reporters have to worry about. The risk of surveillance for American journalists may still well originate at home — with their own government agencies — under federal espionage laws.

In 2013, the Associated Press reported that the Justice Department had secretly obtained two months worth of phone records for AP reporters and editors — a move then-AP President Gary Pruitt called an “unprecedented intrusion” into newsgathering. Justice Department officials didn’t want to reveal why it wanted the information, which included 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 the information he reported about North Korea. 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 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 outlets 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 [or] try and quash the subpoena as unreasonable,” Rottman says. A broad records grab could reveal the identities of multiple confidential sources and “give the government insight into what stories you’re chasing.”

To that end, Rottman says, the most secure technologies “are the ones that retain the least information,” so that if a reporter is “served with a subpoena, or if they’re hacked by a nefarious actor, [they] just don’t have the information in their possession.” In some cases, he says,

information can be protected under reporter’s privilege statutes or the Privacy Protection Act, which “limits not just federal officials, but state and local officials, in terms of using warrants to get work product or documentary material from journalists.”

But even with such shield laws, there’s always what Rottman calls that “self-help” dimension to protecting source identities and other sensitive information. “The most important thing to do,” he says, “is to be both cognizant of, and exercise control over, [what] digital information you create as part of your reporting.”

It’s not just foreign and federal governments that go after reporters — nor is the cloak and dagger intrigue limited to the national and international arenas.

When Florida Power & Light was gearing up to try to buy Jacksonville’s local utility company for \$11 billion, Nate Monroe, a metro columnist for The Florida Times-Union, dove into critical reporting on the deal: “It was in a lot of ways a local story, [but] there were big stakes,” he says.

As Monroe was watching, he was being watched.

As the Times-Union, Orlando Sentinel, and non-profit news consortium Floodlight reported, a consulting firm working with FPL had a 72-page dossier on Monroe that “delved into his financial history, his political party affiliation, the names and phone numbers of his relatives and neighbors, his unredacted Social Security number, the make of his car, his driver’s license and license plate numbers, and places where he’d lived since childhood.” He was photographed without his knowledge. He was

tracked — even, apparently, while out of town for a friend’s wedding five hours away from Jacksonville.

Monroe found out about the surveillance from — who else? — an anonymous tipster.

“I believe that there were more documents about the surveillance stuff that we just never saw,” Monroe says. “I don’t know if they were looking for whether I was meeting with [confidential] sources.”

He says he hasn’t lost his sources en masse, but these days, Monroe tries to remain mindful of his surroundings. “If some consulting firm is [using] badass Israeli software to tap into my phone ... I don’t have the bandwidth to control for that,” he says. But “going to the City Hall watering hole to meet someone for a happy hour is not a thing I do anymore. I try to think about places that are a little bit off the beaten path.” He sets his phone to regularly delete messages, preserving only what he really needs, and uses encrypted apps like Signal.

“When you’ve been followed, I promise you, you’re gonna look in the rearview mirror when you’re going to meet a source. You’re gonna give it an extra couple looks. And you’re not gonna leave your phone at the bar when you go to the bathroom,” he says.

Monroe also takes pains to be direct with tipsters about the risk they’re taking — and his ability to mitigate it.

“This does not always work to our — and by our, I mean journalists’ — benefit, but now when I talk to confidential sources, particularly for the first time, I try to be really clear with them about what it is they’d be agreeing to do by being a source, and to be clear that I cannot ensure that they will be protected because there are things out of my control,” he says. “I think one way to protect people is to be clear to them about what the risks to them are that we cannot protect them from.”

Baker-White, the Forbes reporter tracked by ByteDance, agrees that having that kind of talk up front is vital.

“Every source’s fears and every source’s needs are going to be different. Sources can be scared of different things. They can be scared of foreign governments, they can be scared of the U.S. government, they can be scared of private companies, they can be scared of private citizens. And you really have to work with [them] to understand what they are afraid of [or] what the potential threats are against them,” she says.

In March, Baker-White reported for Forbes that the FBI and Justice Department had launched an investigation into ByteDance’s use of the app to surveil journalists, including her. She says as far as she knows, none of her sensitive contacts came to harm because of the monitoring, and she’s continued to report deeply on the company — including with help from confidential sources.

“The fact that a technology company was trying to surveil me makes me want to cover them more, not less — and I think covering surveillance is an important part of the way everybody understands the risk,” she says. “Maybe if we have more reporting, we’ll get less surveillance.” ■

As Florida Times-Union reporter Nate Monroe amped up 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 man with a mustache, wearing a dark blue suit jacket over a light blue button-down shirt, stands in profile looking out a large window. The window shows a dense urban skyline with various high-rise buildings. The interior has a grey wall and a lamp is partially visible on the left.

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's BJP ahead of the crucial 2024 elections

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

In 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 ownership 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. Its sale will have far-reaching implications for India's media ecosystem, which has progressively become less free by many measures over the last decade. Three to four journalists are killed in connection with their work every year in India, which remains "one of the world's

most dangerous countries for the media," according to Reporters Without Borders, the nonprofit that tracks press freedoms around the globe. Its press freedom index ranking — 161 out of 180 nations — places the country in the bottom eighth along with Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Iran.

After the BBC aired a documentary in January exploring Modi's role in anti-Muslim riots that left more than 1,000 dead in Gujarat in 2002, its Delhi and Mumbai offices were raided under the pretext of a tax evasion investigation and the phones of journalists in the office were confiscated. (The government also blocked online streaming of the documentary, titled "The Modi Question," and students at a university in Delhi were arrested on Jan. 25 for trying to hold a screening.) In Kashmir, the situation has devolved to the point where arrests and raids are common, and the digital archives of independent news organizations are disappearing. In February, Indian officials released Muslim journalist Siddique Kappan after charging him under an anti-terrorism law and holding him for two years without a trial. (When he was arrested, Kappan, who was reportedly tortured while in custody, was on his way to report a story about a Dalit girl who was gang raped and later died.) "Indian law is protective in theory but charges of defamation, sedition, contempt of court and endan-

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gering national security are increasingly used against journalists critical of the government, who are branded as 'anti-national,'" observed Reporters Without Borders in its assessment of India. "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. Journalists who try to cover anti-government strikes and protests are often arrested and sometimes detained arbitrarily."

At the same time, Modi's allies have weaponized social media, using it to both discredit journalists and "mold public perception on platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook," The New York Times reported. The scale of misinformation peddled on social media reached unprecedented levels during the pandemic as bad information stoked fear and hate toward Muslims in India, particularly demonising the Tablighi Jamaat, a global Islamic movement that was holding a conference in Delhi. Foreign attendees were charged with violating their visa conditions and committing the "malignant act" of spreading the coronavirus in India. In all, 952 foreigners were arrested, many of whom had their phones taken away and were locked up in rat- and mosquito-infested "quarantine" centers. The incident sparked a diplomatic scandal, and the embassies of nearly three

dozen nations had to get involved to get their citizens out of India.

"The takeover of NDTV by the Adani group, which is a huge supporter of the Modi administration, can only have an adverse impact for the elections in 2024," says Salil Tripathi, veteran journalist and board member of PEN International. "NDTV was among the last remaining networks that attempted being objective and counter[ed] the relentlessly jingoistic reporting that is the hallmark of its more successful rivals, who also have had much wider reach. NDTV's outward independence made the imbalance seem less lopsided. Now that countervailing force has gone."

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 with very little public interest information and almost no reporting critical of government policies or politicians. It has come to be sarcastically known as "speak-

Last November, Ravish Kumar, one of India's leading broadcast journalists, resigned from his job as senior executive editor of NDTV after Gautam Adani acquired the network

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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 1984 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.)



Family members of a Covid-19 patient push a hand cart with empty oxygen cylinders in Old Delhi, April 2021. When hospitals struggled to find oxygen during Covid’s second wave, the Modi government denied that patients died as a result of the shortage

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 genocide against

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. The same was true for the guests NDTV invited on air. (An Oxfam study noted that nearly three-quarters of the panelists on the network were from the upper castes.) The channel also wound up being a proving ground for right-wing television superstars like Arnab

Goswami, a controversial journalist whose hardline views in support of the BJP have earned his latest venture — Republic TV — comparisons to North Korean propaganda because of the channel’s support of the ruling party. (A story in May noted 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 devolves, digital and independent newsrooms 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-

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SALIL TRIPATHI, VETERAN JOURNALIST AND BOARD

MEMBER OF PEN INTERNATIONAL

dent digital newsrooms like Scroll, The Wire, and The Caravan that continue to report on Modi and the BJP to hold them to account. They are dwarfed by the country’s more than 17,000 newspapers and 100,000 magazines, but they have banded together to provide a more accurate picture on everything from labor disputes and environmental degradation to the true cost of the pandemic. They have seen an upsurge in support from individual donors and subscribers that have helped to keep these outlets afloat.

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 “executed 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 today.” After having acquired 29 percent of the shares, 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 network.

In the months since the hostile takeover was announced, media experts have blamed the Roys’ decision to take a \$49 million loan in 2009 from Mukesh Ambani, a billionaire who hails from Gujarat and has close ties to the BJP, like Adani. In exchange for the loan, which went unpaid and led to a money laundering investigation, the Roys put up 30 percent of their shares as collateral. In September, Bloomberg noted how the two, ostensibly rival, oligarchs aligned to corner NDTV. “It ought to have been clear, even a decade ago that Mukesh Ambani is no friend of the media. There was always a risk of this happening, [with] this kind of agreement with them,” says Siddharth Varadarajan, editor-in-chief and co-founder of The Wire, a news website. “The more interesting question is that two seemingly hostile business houses — Adani and Ambani — want to collude in this manner

to takeover arguably [India’s] most Independent television station.”

The takeover was preceded by years of harassment. In 2017, India’s Central Bureau of Investigation raided the homes and offices of NDTV founders, which the Roys called a “witch hunt.” The raids were conducted by the government’s Central Bureau of Investigation, which alleged the Roys hadn’t paid back a loan. The Roys produced a 2009 letter from the bank stating the debt was repaid, according to The Caravan. The episode prompted questions about the CBI’s motives. “Even if the bank suffered a loss, as the CBI insists it did, there are questions as to why the country’s premier investigative agency should probe a credit issue between two private parties ... especially when the relevant complaint did not come from the allegedly wronged party,” wrote Anant Nath, editor of The Caravan. Two years later, the Roys were stopped by the authorities from boarding a flight to go on vacation — at the request of the CBI, which had launched a money laundering investigation against the Roys. Yet, the crackdown on the Roys appears to have eased since the channels changed hands.

The Modi government’s years-long harassment of the Roys and NDTV’s acquisition by one Modi’s closest allies is not a coincidence. Adani’s rapid ascent on the Forbes’ richest list has taken place in tandem with the rise of Modi’s political fortunes. Both hail from the state of Gujarat, and the businessman has maintained close ties to Modi, allowing him to use Adani Group-owned private jets during his 2014 campaign. The takeover of NDTV barely two years before India’s next general election in 2024 is seen by many as part of a strategy to overwhelmingly dominate the media discourse in favor of Modi.

The day the Roys stepped down, Adani installed three new directors to the NDTV board: Sudipta Bhattacharya, chief technology officer of Adani Group, and two veteran journalists — Senthil Chengalvarayan and Sanjay Pugalía — who have served as directors for Quintillion Business Media, in which Adani’s AMG Media Group acquired a 49 percent stake in March.

In May, NDTV aired what is essentially a multipart propaganda series, praising Modi for his nine years as prime minister, falsely idealizing Modi as a champion 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 stars, cat videos, 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 Indian citizens, consumers and those interested in India, with information and knowledge.” Neither the Adani Group nor NDTV responded to multiple requests for comment.

Not long after the takeover, however, the new own-



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ership exerted its influence on the news-gathering operation. 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 offshore tax havens, according to Hindenburg, which also flagged concerns about a high debt load that put Adani Group on “precarious financial footing.” Within 10 days, Adani Group lost \$108 billion in market value.

Facing a corporate crisis, Adani went back on his promise of not impinging on NDTV’s editorial freedom. For three days, NDTV didn’t touch the Hindenburg story. When it did, it carried Adani’s statements verbatim, calling the revelations an “attack on India.” (Razdan 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 Shows Respect Towards 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 writing 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 — elbowed out of legacy newsrooms — mostly eke out a living 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 unit “draconian” as it obliges social media platforms to not carry news that the government considers “fake,” “false,” or “misleading” — all terms that remain undefined in the law. The Hindu, in an op-ed, called the government run fact-check unit a “wolf in watchdog’s clothing.”

“I think a lot about what happens to journalism now,” Jose says. “How will our newsrooms survive? And what of our fragile democracy?” ■

Journalist Siddique Kappan, center, who was arrested in Oct. 2020, walks out from Lucknow District jail with his wife and son in Feb. 2023. Indian officials charged Kappan under an anti-terrorism law and held him for two years without a trial



REPORTING FROM GAZIANTEP

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'IGNOTI

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 Abedalbasel al-Hasan spends several hours working on his video reports for Syria TV, a popular Syrian news channel employing more than 200 journalists and reaching an audience of four million daily, now headquartered in Turkey.



Abedalbasel al-Hasan spends several hours a day at an internet cafe 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

“OF COURSE, THERE’S NO PRESS FREEDOM LIKE EUROPE.
BUT NO ONE HERE BOTHERS SYRIANS
SPECIFICALLY FOR WHAT WE REPORT ON,
AND THAT’S MORE THAN ENOUGH”

OSAMA AGHI FOUNDER OF NINAR PRESS

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 affecting refugees. Their coverage has been instrumental in helping both local and Western audiences understand the plight of the Syrian people at a time when the country and region are regressing in terms of press freedom.

When the border closed for the majority of civilians, people in Syria accessed this journalism online and tuned into radio broadcasts, if they lived close enough. For newspapers, it was even more complicated. Five outlets, including Koulouna Souroun, one of the first post-revolution, independent Syrian newspapers, and Enab Baladi, a nonprofit print and online newspaper focusing on peaceful resistance stories, created a network in Gaziantep that printed the papers and transported them to Syria for distribution — a risky endeavor that could wind someone up in prison or worse.

Although Turkey also scores dramatically low in terms of worldwide press freedom standards (more than 90 journalists and media workers have been detained there since 2018), it is estimated that hundreds of Syrian journalists have crossed the border into Turkey in the past 12 years and begun working remotely, often as freelancers for international outlets. Within Turkey, Gaziantep — a city at the crossroads of the Middle East — has become the media capital of Syria with the blessing of the Turkish authorities. Over the last decade, about a dozen radio stations and a dozen Syrian exile-led newspapers have taken root here, according to officials at the French Agency for Media Cooperation (CFI), a French media development institute. Syrian journalists are attracted to the city because of the cheaper costs compared to Istanbul, its close proximity to Syria, and the already high number of Syrian residents.

That’s not to say there haven’t been challenges for Syrian journalists operating in Gaziantep. Many are fearful that President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who won another five-year term in late May, will follow through on his campaign promise to deport one million Syrians, a platform that has fueled the harassment of Syrian ref-

ugees. The Turkish authorities have done little to quell the unrest, and journalists have often been the targets of these attacks.

In March, Ahmad Rihawi, an anchor for Orient News TV, and Alaa Farhat, the channel’s director, were arrested in Istanbul after a Turkish political analyst went on a racist tirade on air and ripped up Rihawi’s notes. (They were released two days later.) Two Syrian journalists in Turkey were detained in January for deportation, at least one of whom was beaten, according to RSF, and others worry about a similar fate. The bureaucratic hurdles — including having to register a news outlet as a production company and the complicated paths to receive work permits for staff that are often withheld for political purposes — are another challenge that Syrians in Turkey have learned to navigate.

“We just need a safe space where to publish our news,” says Osama Aghi, founder of Ninar Press, an on-line weekly that covers political news about Syria and is based in Gaziantep. “It’s important to give an opportunity to Syrian journalists to find a [physical] space where to freely report and publish their stories.”

SITUATED IN SOUTHEASTERN TURKEY, less than 150 kilometers from Aleppo — one of the cities most impacted by the Syrian conflict — Gaziantep was near the epicenter of the Feb. 6 earthquake that killed more than 50,000 people in Turkey. The earthquake has tested an already unstable situation for journalists, some of whom have been detained for reporting on the aftermath of the tragedy. From his little table at Kafka, al-Hasan confesses his worries.

“Lately, I feel that even in Gaziantep it’s becoming harder to be a Syrian reporter,” he says. “I feel there still are some boundaries, and I cannot deliver the full story or do investigations on our conditions in the country.” Most stories about deportation threats and Syrian child labor exploitation are reported by foreign journalists and outlets, or by Syrian journalists working as staff for them because they benefit from Western protection. It’s also risky for them to cover Turkish politics, as was the case in May as the country geared up for its presidential election.

But still, the Syrian newsrooms that were forced to close their offices for a few weeks after the earthquake kept operating with their staff working from home or from the few open cafes amid the rubble, similar to the times many Syrian journalists worked under shelling during the war.

Gaziantep has always carried a dual identity. It used to be part of the Ottoman Empire, and today — particularly after a decade of conflict — bilingual street signs, shops with both Turkish and Arabic products, and Syrian and Turkish restaurants standing next to each other fill the narrow streets that are reminiscent of old Aleppo city. Today half a million Syrians live here, and since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, the city has become a major humanitarian aid hub as well as a flourishing place for intellectuals, writers, and activists.

In Gaziantep, despite the challenges, Syrian exiles



ABDULSALAM JARROUD

have a wide variety of media to choose from across radio, television, print, and digital, including even a magazine for children. This is what pushed Aghi — a writer and activist who spent nearly a decade in prison between the 1980s and early 90s for opposing the government — to launch Ninar in 2020.

“In Syria there was no free press before 2011,” explains the 68-year-old Aghi. “We were not allowed to publish anything even slightly controversial.” In the last three years Ninar has covered human rights, feminism, and local Syrian politics. “We noticed there was especially a lack of gender-related stories, so we decided to focus much of our reporting on that,” Aghi says. That helped many of their female readers to better understand their rights, he adds.

Today Ninar has a staff of six, plus a dozen freelancers, many of whom are in Syria, mainly in the northern areas where it’s still safer to report. In Damascus, he says, it’s too risky to keep correspondents. The Gaziantep newsroom, located in the quiet, residential area of Gazimuhtar Pasa, is a simple two-room space with just a few desks and chairs, and a tray always full of Syrian biscuits and freshly-made coffee.

“This was the best possible place to create something like this, because it’s like a new Syria, the one we hoped to create back home but couldn’t,” says Aghi, who fled his home country after the Assad regime and armed

groups began threatening his life because of his reporting on ISIS.

For those still operating in Syria, using fake names to protect identities is a common practice. Aghi says he receives reports from Syria from reporters whose identity he knows but publishes the stories using fake names to protect their identities. When paying contributors, he uses cash so that authorities are not able to trace the money back to Ninar. Although the website reaches so far just a few thousand readers each day, both from Syria and abroad, he says he’s happy with how far they’ve come.

A handful of television stations have also relocated here — mostly small-scale newsrooms streaming online through YouTube and Facebook channels — but there are also a couple broadcasting through satellite signals.

Aleppo Today, which originally broadcasted from Aleppo, moved its operations to Gaziantep after its anti-regime rhetoric made it too risky for them to keep operating inside Syria. The station, which broadcasts over satellite and streams online, covers issues like the migrant situation on the Evros river where many Syrians trying to cross illegally into the European Union have been stuck for extended periods of time because of border patrols, leading sometimes to their expulsion back to Turkey or even their death. One of their reports sounded the alarm regarding 44 Syrians, including women and infants, who had been stuck for two months on an island between

Inspired by the wide variety of Syrian media being produced across Turkey, Osama Aghi launched Ninar Press to cover topics including human rights, gender, and local Syrian politics



Lina Chawaf, founder of Radio Rozana, helped train dozens of citizen journalists to become independent reporters inside Syria and later hired them to work at Rozana

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 Hara FM, another Syrian radio station that moved its offices to Gaziantep right after the conflict began. Sabagh was hired in 2016 by Aleppo Today, where he started as an assistant producer for 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 Sabagh says he’s worked on is “Sautik Bigaieer” (Your Voice Changes Reality), which presents profiles of Syrian women who need help and connects them with those who can provide support, such as non-governmental organizations, government agencies, or influencers. “We have found solutions to difficult problems for many Syrian women — legal problems, health problems, and even family problems,” he says. One episode about a woman with

an amputated foot resulted in a team of volunteers giving her an electric wheelchair and new furniture.

Sabagh says it’s reports like these that allow reporters to feel a connection to the Syrian people and help them appreciate their mission. Part of their airtime is dedicated to entertainment and lifestyle pieces because he believes that journalists should not only give voice to a community’s hopes and expose its problems, but they also have a duty to report on more positive trends about refugee integration through business success stories and how Syrians contribute to Turkish society. These types of stories, he adds, are easier to deliver given the threat of deportations.

LINA CHAWAF WAS RELIEVED when in 2013 she moved the staff of the outlet she helped launch, Radio Rozana, from Syria to Gaziantep. Rozana 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 administrators are based in Paris.

ABDULSALAM JARROUD

“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 topics, “it’s definitely a big improvement compared to what we would face if we were to 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.

Chawaf, a media consultant who’s helped launch five radio stations in Arab Spring countries like Libya and Yemen, helped train dozens of citizen journalists to become independent reporters inside Syria and later hired them to work at Rozana.

She trained them to cover conflict and corruption in emergency situations, which was useful when reporting on Covid-19 and the earthquake in February, she says.

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 chats 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 and abuse issues in the wider Middle East. The podcast, which has 15 episodes, has helped individuals find the support they need. For example, the program helped a woman realize that she was the victim of domestic violence from a bipolar partner and connected her with the right lawyers to receive legal assistance. The woman later joined Rozana as a staff journalist.

“Listeners don’t want 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 for the past four years, says that there are many stories that focus attention on the conflict in Syria — namely migration stories on the Turkish-Greek border and the recent earthquake — but those are tragedies. The collective goal of Syrian journalists in Gaziantep is to show a different side of the mainstream narrative.

“In the last two years, I started focusing on the suc-

cess stories of Syrians in all countries of the world and showing the bright side of their lives away from war,” he explains. Today, in addition to broadcasting via satellite, Syria TV has found a wider audience through social media, with its Facebook livestreams reaching seven million people daily. Its digital platform, Syria Stream, launched in 2019 and has gained followers among Syrians both inside and outside the country, as well as wider Arab audiences. The outlet’s focus is on positive stories about the revolution, backed by the channel’s most popular show “I Was a Witness,” a program dedicated to telling the stories of the political activists putting their lives on the line in Syria.

T HE SYRIAN PRESS has been financially struggling over the past few years, as attention has shifted away from the civil war and its destruction, 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 company 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 often 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 forces, 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 applying for grants.”

The majority of his staff have second jobs. Aghi works as 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 money for his role as editor-in-chief, he sees it as a mission, 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.” ■

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

LINA CHAWAF RADIO ROZANA

1974

Phil Hudgins is author of “Grace and Disgrace: Living with Faith and the Leader of the Dixie Mafia” (BookLogix 2023), the story of Ruby Nell Birt, who was married to Billy Sunday Birt, described as the “deadliest man in Georgia.”

1986

Carmen Fields, host of the public affairs program Higher Ground on WHDH-TV in Boston, is the author of “Going Back to T-Town: The Ernie Fields Territory Big Band,” published by the University of Oklahoma Press in June.

1994

Christina Lamb, author and chief foreign correspondent for the Sunday Times of London, won Amnesty International’s 2023 Outstanding Impact Award for her article on the British women and children still stranded in ISIS camps in Syria.

1998

Julia Keller is author of the new book “Quitting: A Life Strategy, The Myth of Perseverance — and How the New Science of Giving Up Can Set You Free” (Balance, April 2023).

2001

Ken Armstrong, a ProPublica reporter, and **Raquel Rutledge**, NF ’12, a reporter for the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, have won an Ellie Award for feature writing from the American Society of Magazine Editors for “The Landlord & the Tenant,” their investigation into the history and fallout of a Milwaukee house fire.

2003

Amy Driscoll, the deputy editorial page editor for the Miami Herald, won the Pulitzer Prize for editorial writing as part of the paper’s editorial board for “Broken Promises,” a five-part series focused on the failure of Florida public officials to deliver on many taxpayer-funded services promised to residents.

2004

Masha Gessen will join the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at CUNY this fall as a full professor. Gessen is a staff writer for The New Yorker, author of 11 books, and a recognized expert in Russian life and politics.

Santiago Lyon, head of advocacy and education for Adobe’s Content Authenticity Initiative (CAI), has received the National Press Photographers Association’s Innovation Award for revolutionizing the industry through his CAI work.

2010

Monica Campbell has joined The Washington Post as an audio editor working with the “Post Reports” team. Campbell previously worked as a senior editor and reporter for “The World,” produced by PRX and WGBH, and as an editor for WBUR’s podcast unit.

Alissa Quart is author of the new book “Bootstrapped: Liberating Ourselves from the American Dream” (Ecco, March 2023), a look at how people can shed the American obsession with self-reliance that has made individuals less healthy, less secure, and less fulfilled.

2012

Raquel Rutledge is starting a new job as investigations editor at The Examination, a nonprofit newsroom that will launch later this year. Rutledge previously worked as reporter and editor for the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.

2013

Chong-ae Lee, editor and team leader of the Future and Vision Team of the Seoul Broadcasting System (SBS), has received an award from South Korea’s Minister of Health and Welfare for her work on the intersection of journalism and trauma.

Blair Kamin will serve on the selection committee determining the team that will design the Fallen Journalists Memorial on the National Mall. The memorial will “commemorate America’s commitment to a free press by honoring journalists who sacrificed their lives in service to that cause.”

2014

Flavia Krause-Jackson has been promoted to executive editor at Bloomberg News, overseeing economics and government coverage in Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America from the London bureau.

2016

Mónica Guzmán has been named the inaugural McGurn Fellow for Media Integrity and the Fight Against

Disinformation at the University of Florida’s College of Journalism and Communications and the Levin College of Law.

Debra Adams Simmons, vice president for diversity, equity, and inclusion at National Geographic, delivered the alumni keynote address at Syracuse University’s 2023 College of Arts and Sciences/Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs undergraduate convocation in May.

2017

Mary Louise Schumacher has been appointed executive director of the Dorothea and Leo Rabkin Foundation, a grant program for visual arts journalists. Schumacher previously was a longtime art and architecture critic for the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.

2021

John Archibald, a columnist for AL.com and The Birmingham News, together with his son Ramsey Archibald and their colleagues Ashley Remkus and Challen Stephens, won the Pulitzer Prize for local reporting for exposing how a rogue police force in the town of Brookside, Alabama, preyed on residents to generate revenue. The reporting also received the 2023 Hillman Prize for Web Journalism, a George Polk Award for Local Reporting, and the National Headliner Award’s Best in Show honor.

Robert Frederick joined the Global Virus Network as the nonprofit’s inaugural chief content officer, overseeing GVN’s mission to produce authoritative science-driven information and policy perspectives. He previously served as digital managing editor at American Scientist.

Valeria Fernández, a 2021 Visiting Nieman Fellow and the managing editor of palabra., a multimedia platform of NAHJ, is the executive producer of the new podcast series “Así Fue.” In each episode, journalists and community leaders discuss issues including business, immigration, and the arts.

Sarah Kaufman was inducted into the 2023 Alumni Hall of Achievement at the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University in May. Kaufman was the chief dance critic and senior arts writer at The Washington Post for more than two decades.

Hodding Carter III, NF ’66, civil rights champion and State Department spokesman, dies at 88

The assistant secretary of state for public affairs during the Iran hostage crisis also won the 1946 Pulitzer Prize for his work on racial justice

Hodding Carter III, a journalist who began his career at his family’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 in 1935 and grew up in Greenville, Mississippi. He served for two years in the Marine Corps and returned to Greenville to begin working as a reporter at the Delta Democrat-Times.

It was there that Carter covered the civil rights movement and eventually took over his father’s roles as editor and publisher of the paper. During his time in the newsroom, he wrote thousands of editorials. The paper persevered in its coverage of racial inequality despite boycotts and threats from white supremacists.

Carter was co-chair of the Loyalist Democrats, a diverse group of civil rights advocates that won a credentials battle to unseat Mississippi’s all-white delegation at



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

the Democratic National Convention in 1968.

Carter worked on the successful presidential campaign for Jimmy Carter (no relation) in 1976 and later 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 the 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.

Willoughby Mariano and her colleagues at The Atlanta Journal-Constitution have won an IRE Award for their investigation “Dangerous Dwellings.” The series exposed the hazardous conditions that thousands of residents, mostly people of color, must deal with in Atlanta-area apartment complexes.

2022

Patricia Laya has been named as the first Andean bureau chief for Bloomberg News, overseeing coverage and reporting from

Colombia and Venezuela. Laya previously served as Bloomberg’s Venezuela bureau chief.

2023

Deborah Berry has been inducted as a member of the 2023 Hall of Fame class at the University of Maryland’s Philip Merrill College of Journalism. A 1985 graduate of the school, Berry is a national correspondent for USA Today.

Bopha Phorn, a Cambodian

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 Washington-based opinion columnist for The Wall Street Journal.

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. ■

journalist, has been selected as one of 20 new members of the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ).

Moises Saman, a photojournalist and Magnum Photos member, is the author of the new book “Glad Tidings of Benevolence” (Gost, March 2023). Published to coincide with the 20th anniversary of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, it focuses on Saman’s work covering the Iraq War and its aftermath. ■

Meet the 2024 Nieman fellows



Manasseh Azure Awuni

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



James Barragán

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.



Julia Barton

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



Julian Benbow

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.

Ben 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



Elsie Chen



Ben Curtis



Lebo Diseko



Sonya Groysman



Cristela Guerra

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 society deal with collective and individual trauma related to war, state repression, and polarization.



Javier Lafuente



Denise Hruby

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 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



Yana Lyushnevskaya



Beandrea July

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.

Javier Lafuente, deputy managing editor of the American edition of the Spanish newspaper El País, will study the evolution of new left-wing



Ilya Marritz



Jikyung Kim

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.

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



Andrea Patiño



Rachel Pulfer

driving authoritarianism and dis- and misinformation, and putting democracy under strain in diverse societies around the world.

Andrea Patiño Contreras, a video journalist and editor from Colombia who is based in Boston, will study how journalists can create trauma-informed practices when reporting on vulnerable populations, particularly survivors of sexual violence.

Rachel Pulfer, executive director of Journalists for Human Rights in Toronto, will focus on how human rights journalism can inform and improve policymaking in and for developing countries. Pulfer is the 2024 Martin Wise Goodman Canadian Nieman Fellow.



Jaemark Tordecilla



Andrew Ryan

Andrew Ryan, an investigative reporter for The Boston Globe, will study how reinvigorated accountability reporting at the local level could be used to establish fresh footholds in news deserts. This will include examining whether artificial intelligence might help augment local investigative reporting.

Denise Schrier Cetta, a producer and writer for “60 Minutes” at CBS News, will study how scientific advances in gene editing, longevity, and neuroscience are improving health and increasing life expectancy while also threatening to increase inequality between those who have access to new technologies and those who do not.



Sarah Varney



Denise Schrier Cetta

Surabhi Tandon, an Indian reporter and filmmaker, will research the science and history of impactful storytelling, analyze elements of video journalism that are most resonant, and what stories stick in an age of information overload.

Jaemark Tordecilla, head of digital media at GMA News in the Philippines, will study audience trust in media organizations and what newsrooms can do to strengthen that trust and build engagement.

Sarah Varney, a senior correspondent for KFF Health News based in Massachusetts, will study the journalistic framing and



Johanna Wild



Surabhi Tandon

ethics of abortion coverage in the United States, focusing on the intersection of religion, sociology, politics, medicine, and gender.

Johanna Wild, a German open-source researcher and founder of the investigative tech team at Bellingcat in Amsterdam, will study how open-source research tools can be collaboratively built, maintained, and made accessible to the diverse global researcher community.

Annie Jieping Zhang, founder and CEO of Matters Lab in Hong Kong and Taiwan, will work on building decentralized support networks for independent journalists who face censorship and political repression. ■



Annie Jieping Zhang

SOUNDING



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 came from.

In addition to me, there was photographer Jarrad Henderson, editor Nichelle Smith, features editor Kelley Benham 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 next 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 male 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 1960s — 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 jailed 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, photo, video, podcast, and even the augmented reality team, which created an app that took viewers on one of the Freedom Rider buses. Reporters, including me, and photographer Jasper Colt spent months talking to veterans at the courthouse, the jail, the lunch counter where they protested 60 years ago. I was moved when a friend, Wiley Hall, emailed: “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. ■

JARRAD HENDERSON

A Dangerous Flight in ISIS Territory

Moises Saman, NF '23, on documenting the desperation of the Iraq war

In 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. ■

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