



An Emergent Neo-Journalism

The Decline and Renewal of News Media

ROBERT H. GILES

There are two fundamental ways of thinking about the state of journalism across the globe. The first is reflected in headlines and stories describing violence against journalists in Mexico, Russia, Iran, China, Zimbabwe, Colombia, and a long list of other countries. This tragic trend is typically found in countries that have little or no tradition of democracy and, consequently, no appreciation for the watchdog role of a vigorous press. The second view finds newspapers remaining a thriving industry, growing in some regions and shrinking in others, although less dramatically than newspapers in the United States.

Whether newspapers are growing or shrinking in a given country, the impact of the digital era is widely evident. Independent online news organizations have been established to cover local news, international news, and politics, and to produce investigative journalism in the public interest. In countries where the mainstream press is restricted, citizen journalism increasingly is having an impact. Modern technologies, especially mobile smartphones, are enabling individuals to report and transmit

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news from their communities to global audiences, often overcoming official constraints of repressive regimes. For independent journalists, the risks increase; they have no institutional support and limited experience in dealing with intimidation, harassment, or imprisonment.

In this article, I will examine these two types of journalistic environments individually, empirically accounting for recent developments and, in particular, the current situations faced by journalists around the world.

Journalism as a Life of Danger

As Paul Steiger, chairman of the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), an organization based in New York that

responds to attacks on the press worldwide, points out: last year, for the first time, the largest professional category on CPJ's annual census of imprisoned journalists worldwide were Internet journalists. These included bloggers, online editors, and web-based reporters, who together comprised 45 percent of all imprisonments, a truly chilling statistic.

CPJ's reports have revealed threats to the press in supposedly liberal democracies such as Mexico. Twenty-two journalists have been murdered since President Felipe Calderon Hinojosa took office in December 2006 and began a campaign of decisive action against the drug cartels. CPJ's analysis identified systemic failures that if not addressed immediately will seriously curtail freedom of expression and even the rule of law. Its report called for the federal government to intervene to protect the rights of journalists. However, the report noted that journalists themselves are far from blameless, with many in the pay of the same drug cartels that have influenced politics. The political polarization of Mexico's media has not helped either.

In many countries where freedom of expression is

Fatima Tlisova's experience is particularly harsh, but countless other brave journalists—Nieman Fellows among them—have challenged authoritarian regimes and have been subjected to harassment or beatings from police or security organizations. It is the courageous independent journalists that most often are targets of abuse and that depend for support on organizations such as CPJ, the International Press Institute in Vienna, and the International Federation of Journalists, representing 600,000 journalists in 100 countries. They comprise global networks dedicated to responding to journalists in peril and to safeguarding press freedom wherever it is under attack.

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The year's toll included 31 deaths in the Philippines in a politically motivated massacre of reporters and others. Another stark example identified in CPJ's annual report is the number of journalists in prison: China had 24 and Iran had 23, although Iran's number had increased to 47 by the

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constitutionally guaranteed, brutal censorship abounds while journalists are targets of government repression. In the Russian Federation, for example, the Constitution, adopted in 1993 after the fall of the Soviet Union, states that “Everyone shall be guaranteed freedom of thought and speech...Censorship shall be prohibited.” Although Russian President Dmitry Medvedev has said that justice in the murder of journalists is important, the killings continue; 19 journalists have been murdered since 2000, including three in 2009. Others have been beaten for investigating corruption. Arrests are few, and the deep disappointment over the unsolved 2006 murder of Anna Politkovskaya, a correspondent for *Novaya Gazeta*, remains a bitter symbol of Russia's record of injustice.

In late 2009, after her year as a Nieman Fellow at Harvard, Fatima Tlisova, who had worked as an independent journalist for a decade in the North Caucasus region of Russia, returned to her country, driven by the belief that she needed to draw attention to the risks faced by journalists attempting to report independently in the Caucasus. To put it mildly, this was a dangerous undertaking; she had been abducted, tortured, and poisoned by representatives of state services, and she understood that her return would be closely watched. With financial support from the Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting and an assignment from *Nieman Reports*, Tlisova's interviews provided a chilling testimony to the threats to press freedom in post-Soviet Russia.

time the report was released in February 2010. Altogether, governments had 136 journalists in jail at the close of 2009. In many instances, countries trying to limit the flow of news to their citizens typically use vague charges such as spying, revealing state secrets, or inciting subversion of state power as rationales for imprisoning journalists.

Another chilling development is evidence that governments around the globe are using the tools of the Internet against their critics. The Middle East is particularly problematic—CPJ notes that Iran is especially aggressive, breaking into online social networks like Facebook and Twitter in an attempt to identify not just its critics but their friends, allies, and followers as well.

Justin D. Martin, who teaches journalism at the American University in Cairo, says that the most common way that Arab governments stifle investigative reporting is by applying financial pressure. In a story for the fall issue of *Nieman Reports*, Martin writes of the troubling economic intersection between politics and the media in many Arab countries. News organizations are controlled by the state, either through ownership or advertising, and this leads to an essentially unfree press. The example most familiar to *Harvard International Review* readers is *Al-Jazeera*, funded by the Qatari royal family and which refrains totally from criticism of Qatar's government. Martin says there is only sporadic investigative journalism in the autocratic countries of the Middle East. Examples can be found in the independently owned *Al-Ghad* newspaper in Jordan

and among citizen journalists who use mobile cameras and social media to bring videos of official torture in Egypt and other countries to digital outlets such as YouTube.

In China, whose economy is growing spectacularly and is now the world's second largest behind the United States, restrictions on press freedoms remain in spite of modest reforms that mainly benefited foreign journalists covering the 2008 Olympics. China's newspaper industry is burgeoning and is now the second largest market, after India, with 109 million copies sold daily in 2009, according to a report by the World Association of Newspapers. By comparison, Japan, with 50 million daily sales is third and the United States, 46 million, is the fourth largest market. In China, the Internet enjoys relatively greater freedom than other news media, although the government carefully monitors online traffic and recently published a white paper about the Internet, repeating the need for online censorship in the name of respect for local laws and maintaining stability.

These several examples, from all kinds of countries and under both so-called democracy and authoritarianism, underscore the hazards of trying to report truthful accounts of sensitive events. The treatment of journalists and the limits that autocratic and quasi-autocratic governments place on the operations of newspapers and broadcast outlets stand in stark contrast to press freedoms practiced in most Western democracies. International Nieman Fellows who tell of the struggle just to practice their journalistic craft provide unsettling reminders for their US colleagues of how precious are the freedoms of expression guaranteed under the US constitution.

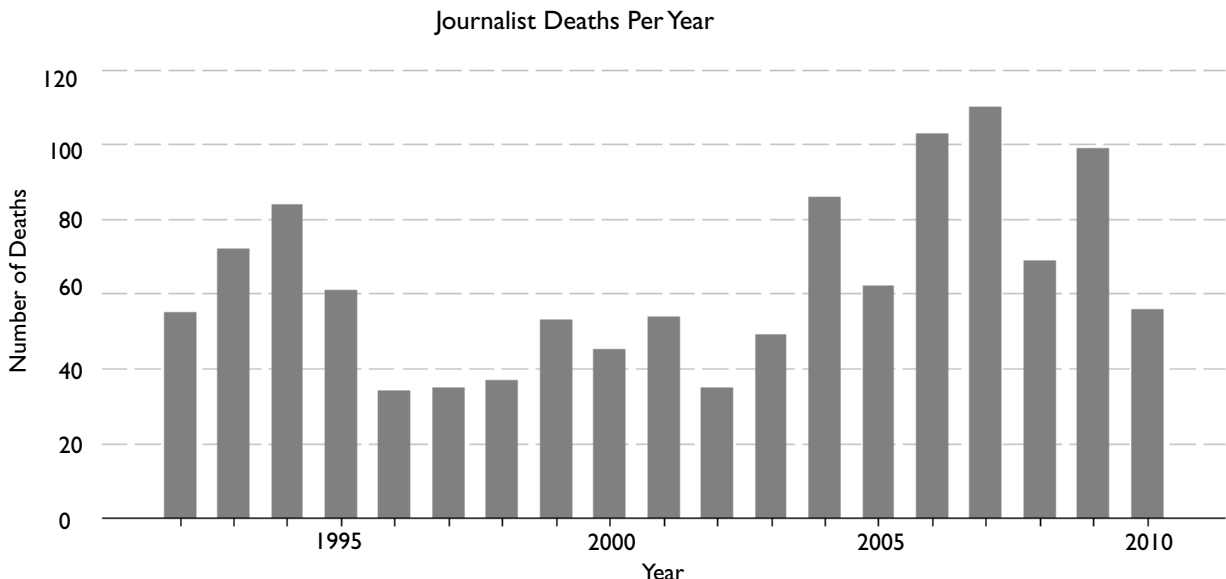
The Changing Environment in the US

While US journalists may have complete freedom

from fear, the news industry in the United States is going through a truly disruptive time, as technological innovation is breaking down the newspaper economic model and providing platforms for online innovations that siphon readers and advertising dollars. The impact of this revolution is being felt worldwide, but the disruptive effects in Asia, Latin America, and Western Europe seem to lag behind those in the United States. The decline of the mainstream newspapers in the United States and the urgency of finding new economic models emphasize a reality that newspaper journalism remains the major source of high-quality news and is essential to sustaining a well-informed public.

This decline has been accompanied by a remarkable emergence of new forms of gathering and presenting news and of innovative ways of funding these enterprises. Local online news outlets, such as *The Voice of San Diego* and *MinnPost* in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area, are having an impact and filling gaps created by reduced coverage in the local daily newspapers. *ProPublica* is an example of independent, non-profit journalism dedicated to investigative reporting "with a moral force." Its brand has been helped through partnerships with high-profile newspapers such as *The New York Times* and television news shows like *60 Minutes*. *ProPublica* reporter Sheri Fink was awarded a Pulitzer Prize earlier this year in a collaborative project with *The New York Times Magazine* for a story that chronicled the urgent life-and-death decisions made by one hospital's exhausted doctors when they were cut off by the floodwaters of Hurricane Katrina. These online innovations are funded in a variety of ways: foundations, individuals, corporate donations, advertisers, and membership donations. The next chapter for these successful startups and others like them will be to find funding that will sustain

Perils of the Press



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them for the long term.

Television and radio have begun a slow recovery from the Great Recession. For newspapers, however, the prognosis is altogether more grim. Alan Mutter, who reports on the news industry for his blog *Reflections of a Newsosaur*, writes, that advertising sales for US newspapers have improved, but only marginally, and still remain well below sustainable levels. With classified advertising—the historical cash cow of US newspapers—having been captured by innovative online startups like Craigslist, newspapers have become more and more dependent on retail advertising revenue. Mutter reports that television, Internet, and radio had strong results while newspaper advertising declined 10 percent during the broad advertising recovery in the first quarter of 2010.

Unlike the United States, the global newspaper-advertising picture is significantly brighter, bouncing back from a 17 percent decline in 2009, which reflected the impact of the global recession, to a forecast of a 0.5 percent increase in 2010. According to WAN's tracking, ad spending in 2009 was down 13.7 percent in Western Europe, 18.7 percent in Central and Eastern Europe, 9.6 percent in Asia, 2.9 percent in Latin America, and stable in the Middle East and Africa. The forecast for 2010 shows a 5.8 percent gain in Asia and 2.2 percent in Western Europe.

Falling advertising revenue is tied to another measure of difficulties facing US newspapers: declining readership, a trend that began a generation ago but has accelerated sharply in the digital era. For the six-month period ending March 31, 2010, the average drop in newspaper circulation nationally was 8.7 percent, according to the Audit Bureau of Circulations, an independent agency that tracks newspaper sales. This was somewhat smaller than the last six-month audit through September 30, 2009, which showed an average circulation drop of 10.6 percent.

A recent report by the World Association of Newspapers shows that daily newspaper circulation globally fell 0.8 percent in 2009 but remained up 5.7 percent over five years. WAN describes this as a minor decline, given the scale of the recession. Every day, 1.7 billion people read a daily newspaper. That number represents 25 percent of the world's population. When non-dailies are added, the global reach of newspapers is 37 percent. In recent years, circulation has declined largely in the developed world, while Asia shows significant growth in newspaper sales, up 1 percent in 2009 and 13 percent over five years. Regional

bright spots in newspaper readership over the past five years are Africa, up 30 percent; Asia, up 13 percent; and South America, up 5 percent. The largest decline between 2005 and 2009 was 10.6 percent in North America, followed by 7.9 percent in Europe. WAN's research indicates that traditional newspapers in many mature markets that have been losing readership are in the forefront of the digital revolution. In the United Kingdom, for example, *The Guardian*, a national daily, reports circulation losses but operates a widely admired website, guardian.co.uk,



A photojournalist reflects upon the destruction of Haiti's earthquake, capturing the aftermath of the disaster in Port-au-Prince on January 17, 2010.

that claims the second-largest online readership of any English-language newspaper in the world, after *The New York Times*.

Another serious measure of the declining US newspapers is the number of journalists losing jobs. Since 2001, US newsrooms have lost more than 25 percent of their full-time staffers, bringing the total of full-time journalists working in daily newsrooms to 41,500, a level not seen since the mid-1970s. In a report on its annual newsroom census, the American Society of News Editors said that US daily newspapers lost another 5,200 jobs in 2009, bringing the total loss of journalists since 2007 to 13,500.

The economic crisis facing newspapers forced many papers to close their foreign bureaus and rely on freelancers for coverage from the world's hot spots. *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Los Angeles Times* are maintaining their foreign desks, at a heavy cost, and dispatches from their correspondents are carried in many papers through distribution by their foreign desks. McClatchy-Tribune Information Services, a recent joint venture of the McClatchy and Tribune companies, operates 30 foreign bureaus, including Baghdad, Cairo, Jerusalem, and Beijing. AP and Reuters serve as foreign desks for most

US newspapers. CNN continues to staff its international bureaus even though its ratings lag behind other cable news networks that emphasize talk and opinion and offer little reporting from the field. Bloomberg has expanded its news-gathering operations around the world to cover business, finance, and governments. Publicly funded news organizations such as National Public Radio and BBC also broadened their reach to US audiences hungry for international news.

The global economic crisis also is not limited in its impact to US news media, and is beginning to be felt in newsrooms across Europe. According to the International Press Association in Brussels, the number of accredited reporters in the European Union press corps has shrunk from 1,300 in 2005 to 964 in 2009. Michael J. Jordan, a correspondent based in Slovakia, writes in *Nieman Reports* that Lithuania, a recent EU member, is down to zero correspondents, while the last Latvian reporter fends for survival, and sagging interest in EU affairs may force the Hungarian correspondent to freelance or seek a moonlighting job in public relations. IPA has called for greater cooperation between EU institutions and accredited journalists in the pursuit of greater democracy in Europe's media.

A Turn to the Alternative

Readers who want global news are turning increasingly to the web. *GlobalPost*, a Boston-based international news site launched in January 2009, has 70 reporters in 50 countries and is attracting more than 1 million unique visitors a month from upwards of 220 countries. Its daily news report includes politics, economic developments, health, education, culture, and technology. Other examples indicate that US readers seeking international news are

visiting websites of UK news organizations in large and growing numbers. Ewen MacAskill, Washington, D.C. bureau chief for *The Guardian*, said in an interview with CJR that one-third of *The Guardian's* online readers are in the United States, and large numbers are in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. In July, paidContent.org reported that BBC.com had 17.4 million unique monthly visitors in the United States among its 57.8 million global audience.

In the mix of new websites are efforts at citizen journalism or blogging from hot spots around the world. *Global Voices Online* is a community of more than 300 bloggers and translators that posts reports from blogs and citizen media in 15 languages with emphasis on voices not ordinarily heard in international mainstream media. Its staff of volunteer writers and part-time editors aggregate the efforts of people around the world who are blogging, podcasting, and uploading photos, videos, and information. Solana Larsen, managing editor of *Global Voices Online*, gives this example of bringing forward perspectives not heard anywhere else. In a story for the fall issue of *Nieman Reports*, Larson writes, "While news stories about the coup last year in Madagascar tended to echo the French foreign ministry rather than the Malagasy people themselves, *Global Voices Online* helped international journalists reach bloggers from Madagascar who offered a citizen's perspective."

From this mixed picture of decline and renewal, innovation and an increased role for citizens in reporting on world events, comes the image of a very exciting time for journalism. Some traditional news organizations may eventually fade from the scene. Other forms of gathering and conveying news will replace them. Technology is nurturing innovation, experimentation, and the rise of the independent journalist. The large, mainstream news organizations will continue for many years. Some will effectively adapt new ideas that will

add value to their menu of news and bring new streams of revenue. Newcomers will emerge, inspired by an idea and a belief in the importance to democracy of a well-informed public. Technology has given them the means to try an idea, to take a risk, to join the growing legion of new voices telling the world's story.

Totalitarian regimes, over time, will be forced to accept transparency forced on them by citizen journalists working collaboratively or individually to tell stories. We don't know how long the digital revolution in journalism will last; revolutions are fickle in this way. But along the way, we are likely to learn more about the world we share. ■



Julian Assange, founder of Wikileaks, presents a newspaper to London press on July 26, 2010. Assange spoke of leaked US military documents from Afghanistan that may provide evidence of war crimes requiring urgent investigation.