NATIONAL

Most doxxing campaigns only last a few days. But the effects can be felt for months

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Mansee Khurana

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Transcript

Content warning: This story contains vulgar language, threats of sexual violence and death threats.

Posters of some of those kidnapped by Hamas in Israel are displayed on a pole in Manhattan.
Spencer Platt/Getty Images

Doxxing — the practice of publishing someone's private information for revenge or punishment — has been around since the early days of the internet. It's been used against reporters, law enforcement personnel and women speaking out against sexual abuse.

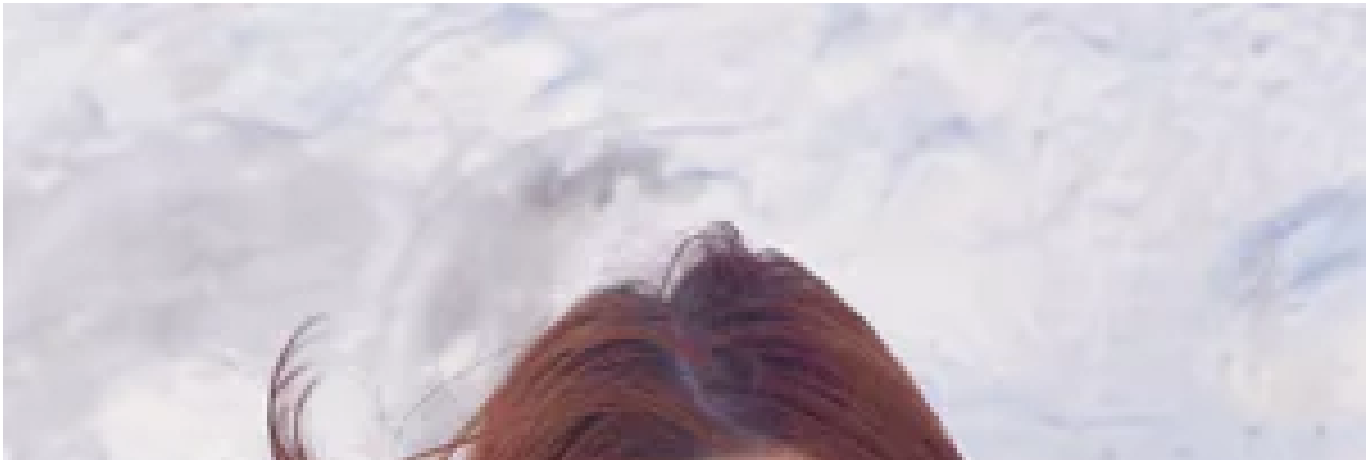
Since last fall, doxxing campaigns have been used to "name and shame" those who express opinions about the Israel-Hamas war.

The names of Harvard students who signed onto a statement from the student group Harvard Undergraduate Palestine Solidarity Committee were plastered on billboards near the university's campus. A scientific journal fired its editor-in-chief for retweeting a satire article. A Florida school district placed a teacher on leave for sending an email about recognizing the Palestinian community. NYU Langone Health fired a doctor for pro-Israel social media posts.

While most doxxing campaigns only last a few days, their effects can be felt for months.

On Nov. 2, Olivia Lynch was walking home from dinner in Brooklyn, N.Y., when she saw a poster that she had seen a few times since the Hamas-led attack on Israel on Oct. 7.

"My first reaction was a twinge in my heart," Lynch said. "Wow, look at this cute kid. Look at these lovely looking people who are being used as pawns in a war. This is awful."



Olivia Lynch, 27, received thousands of messages after being doxxed online.
Olivia Lynch

The poster is designed to look like a standard missing persons poster, but with the addition of the word "kidnapped" in bright red at the top and one of the faces of the 240 hostages taken by Hamas. The posters are available for free online in more than 30 languages, and anyone can print them out and distribute them. The creators of these posters, Israeli artists Nitzan Mintz, Dede Bandaid and Tal Huber, told NPR in a statement that these posters are meant to raise awareness of the innocent civilians being held captive.

Some people, including the artists themselves, believe that tearing down these posters is an antisemitic act, and videos of people tearing down these posters have gone viral.

Lynch doesn't believe that taking down the posters is antisemitic.

"These posters don't exist in a vacuum," Lynch said. "I think they are serving to amplify the messaging that one was seeing, that Israel is completely justified in what they are doing in Gaza."

So, on Nov. 2, Lynch tore down a poster she saw on her walk home.

"What was going through my mind at this point was that this poster is justifying the destruction of Gaza because of these hostages," Lynch said.

Someone filmed Lynch doing so, and by the morning, a video of her tearing down the poster was on the internet. Instagram pages like @JewsHateDatabase posted the video with the caption: "Help us find out who she is — Jew hater spotted in Williamsburg Brooklyn."

NPR sent multiple requests for a comment to the page's creators but hasn't received a response.

Lynch got hundreds of emails filled with death threats, threats of sexual violence and promises to get her fired from her job teaching at an after-school nature program called Wild Ferns with fewer than five people on staff.

One email reviewed by NPR read, "I hope you get lynched like your last name suggests." Another person wrote to her, "Hope you get raped by Nazi Hamas and burn in hell." Another read, "I will make sure every employer knows who you are."

Lynch's employer wasn't spared from the messages. The small business received thousands of emails, one-star Google Reviews and Instagram comments demanding Lynch be fired.

Lynch was at work when her phone started to light up with texts from concerned friends less than 24 hours after the video of her taking down the poster went viral.

"I immediately thought that I needed to try and do damage control," Lynch said.

The consequences

Days after she tore down the poster, Lynch got a call from her boss: She had been fired.

She filed a claim for unemployment benefits a few weeks later, arguing that she had a right to express political opinions outside of the workplace.

"I considered it to be maybe a small act of civil disobedience," Lynch said. "It was nonviolent. I was taking down an inflammatory piece of propaganda."

The New York State Department of Labor denied her claim, stating that she "was held to a higher standard caring for children" and "knew or should" have known her actions would jeopardize her job.

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Lynch filed an appeal to the state's decision, which is currently pending.

Enrique Armijo, a law professor at Elon University, said that Lynch might not have much of a legal case because the First Amendment only applies in cases where the government is restricting free speech, not a private business or employer.

"We're not really talking about the First Amendment with respect to private people who are posting flyers or tearing down flyers or saying things about other people on social media," Armijo said.

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It's clear to Armijo why a small business would make the decision to fire an employee who is the subject of a doxxing campaign.

"Employers have to run business," Armijo said. "They cannot deal with the barrage of comments from strangers saying that someone should be fired."

Wild Ferns denied an interview for this story but did send NPR a statement in which the business stated it had been struggling financially for a while. And after this incident, "the financial and emotional toll was so immense" that they've decided to "suspend the program indefinitely," according to the statement.

How do incidents like this affect free speech culture?

Aaron Terr, the Director of Public Advocacy at the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE), a nonprofit that works to protect free speech, said that while none of these actions — tearing down a poster, doxxing someone or firing someone for misconduct — are illegal, they do hurt free speech culture in the U.S.

"If Americans feel like trip wires are everywhere and they don't know exactly what they can and can't say, you end up in a scenario where millions of Americans opt out of the national political conversation," Terr said.

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Terr believes social media has exacerbated this problem because it's now easier for people to send messages harassing businesses to fire someone for something they've seen online.

"It has facilitated rapid mass pile-ons in a way that wasn't possible before," Terr said.

However, Terr said it is hard to completely defend Lynch's actions. While he thinks that firing someone for actions that took place outside of work is incredibly harmful to free speech culture, he sees tearing down a poster as a type of heckler's veto, which is when a speaker's message is silenced by a dissenting party.

"You're not just expressing your own views about something," Terr said. "You're also interfering with other people's ability to express their views on the same issue."

Lynch says she understands that her action can be interpreted in different ways, but she doesn't think she should've been fired or sent death threats because of what she did. She said she views those messages as an attempt to make her afraid to speak out.

"But I will never feel afraid," Lynch said. "I have felt angry at times, maybe a bit sad, but I've never felt afraid because I am part of something that is far bigger than me."

The audio version of this story was edited by Ashley Westerman. The digital version was edited by Treye Green.

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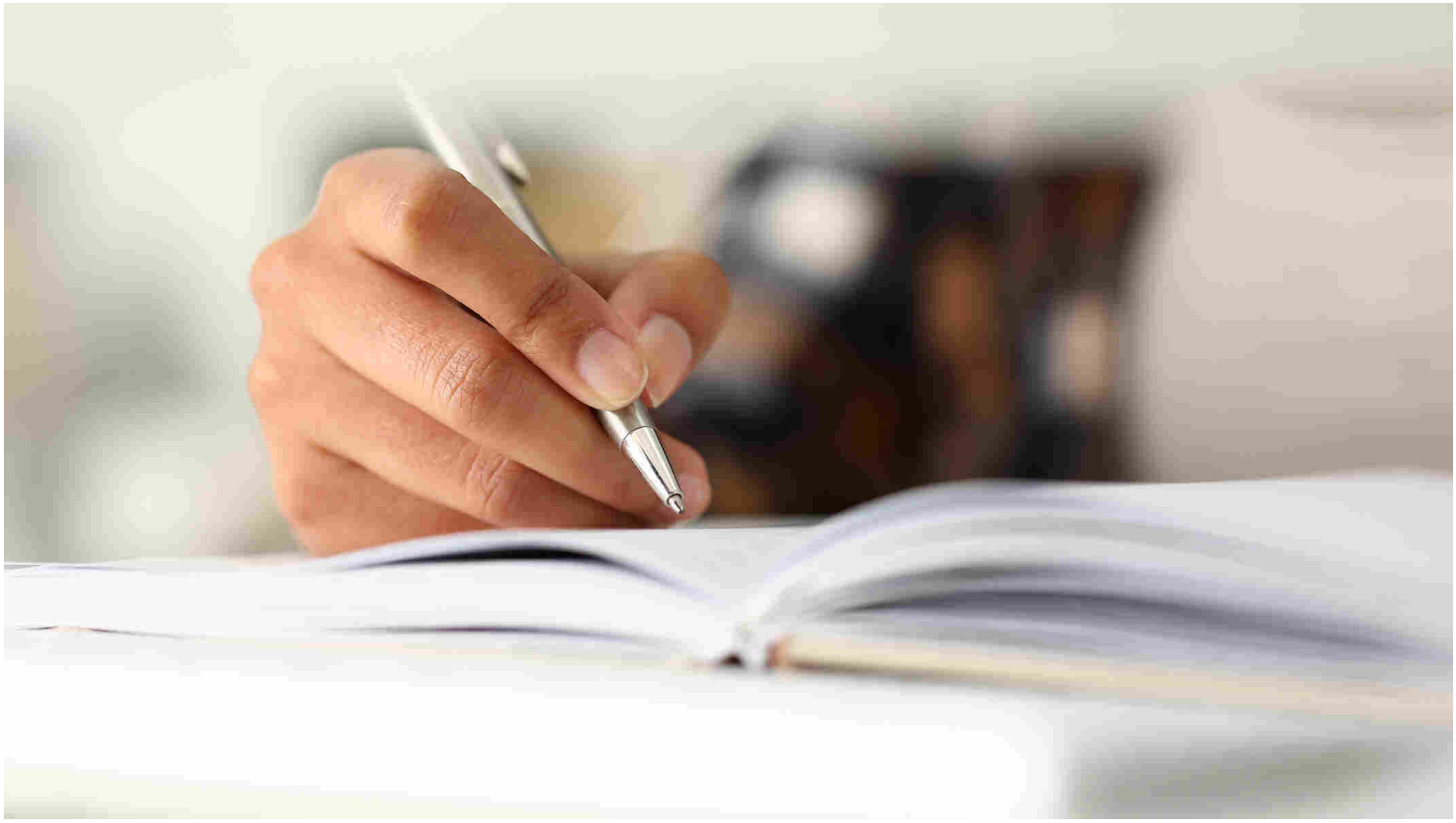

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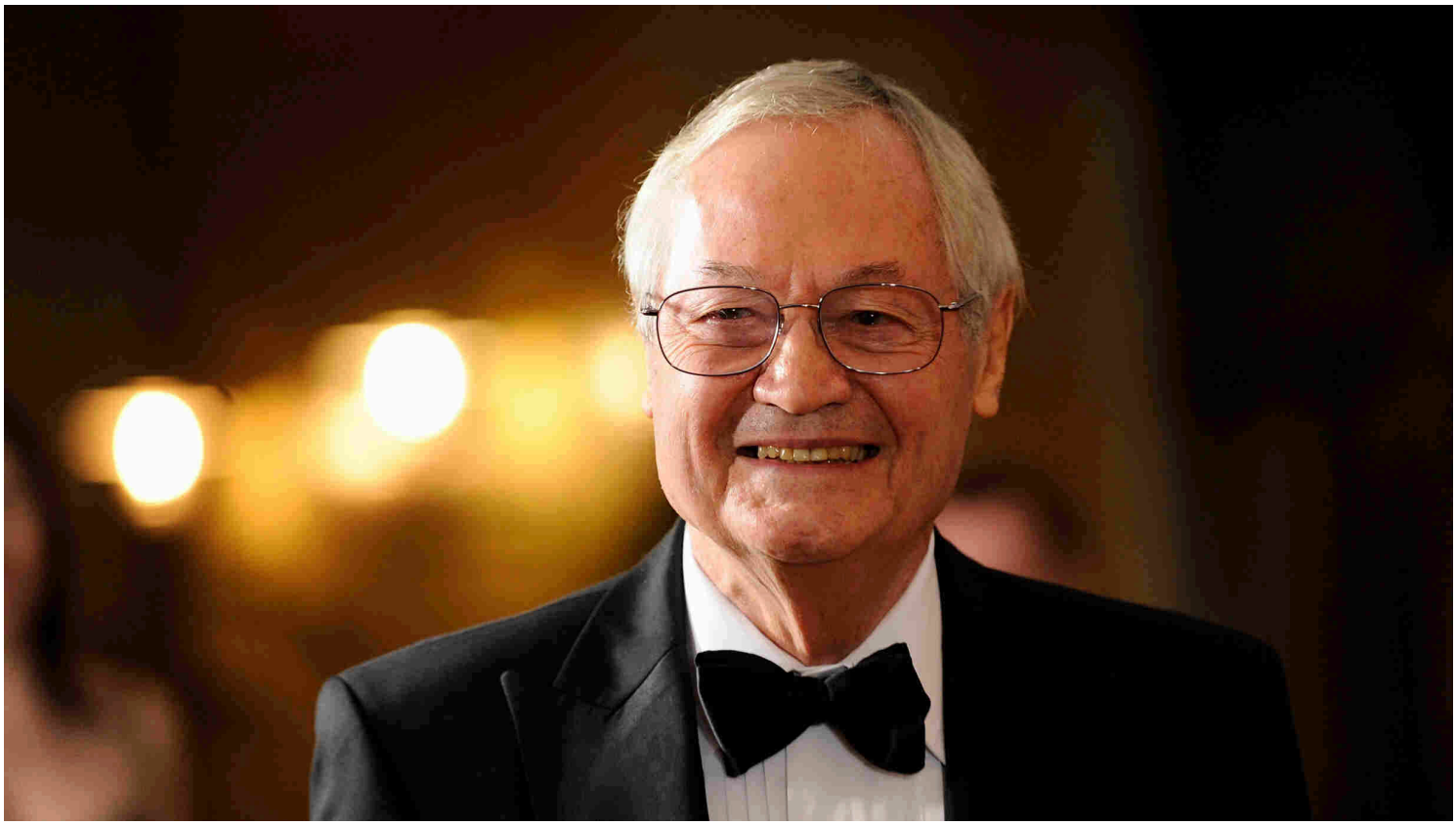

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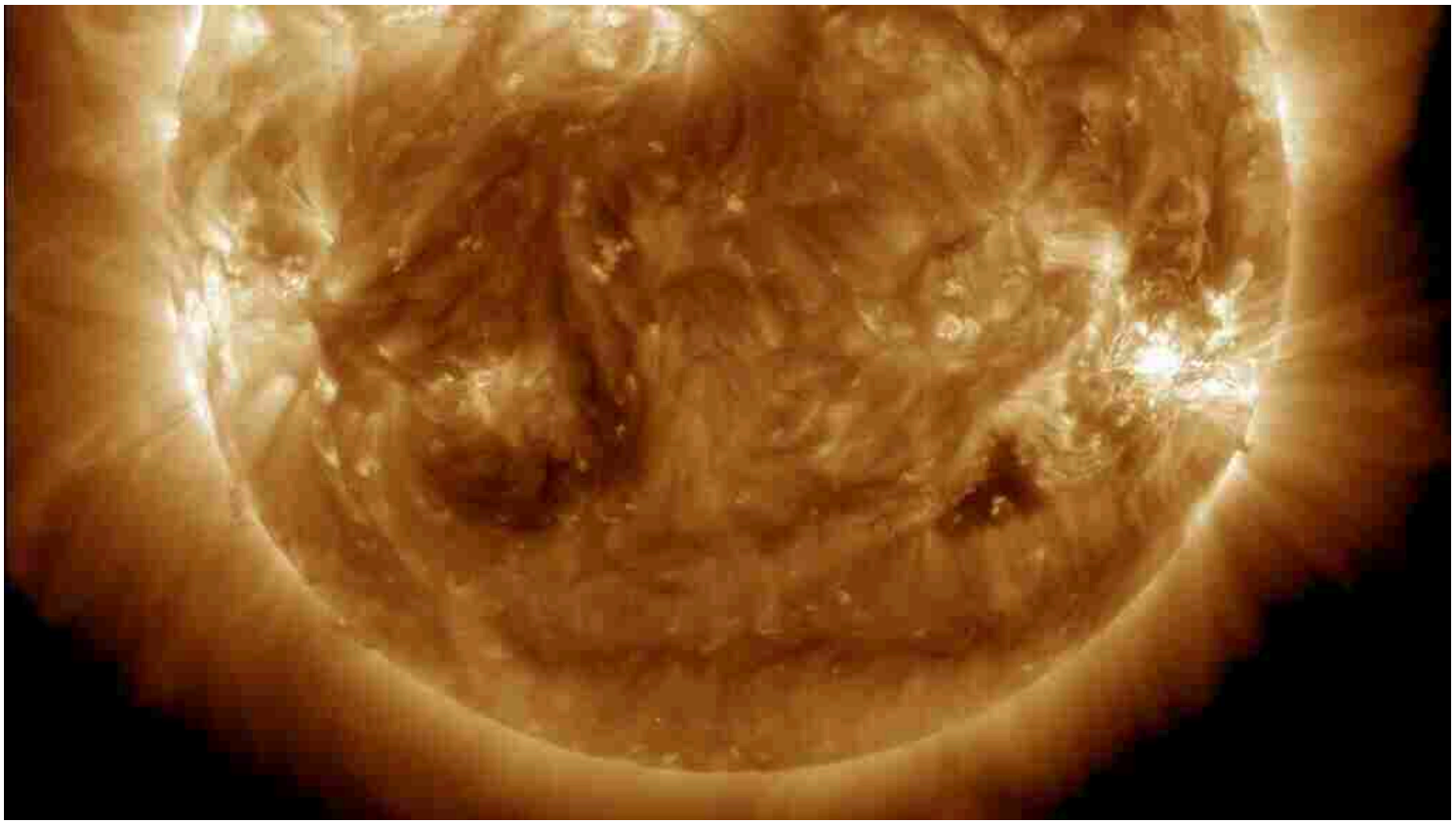

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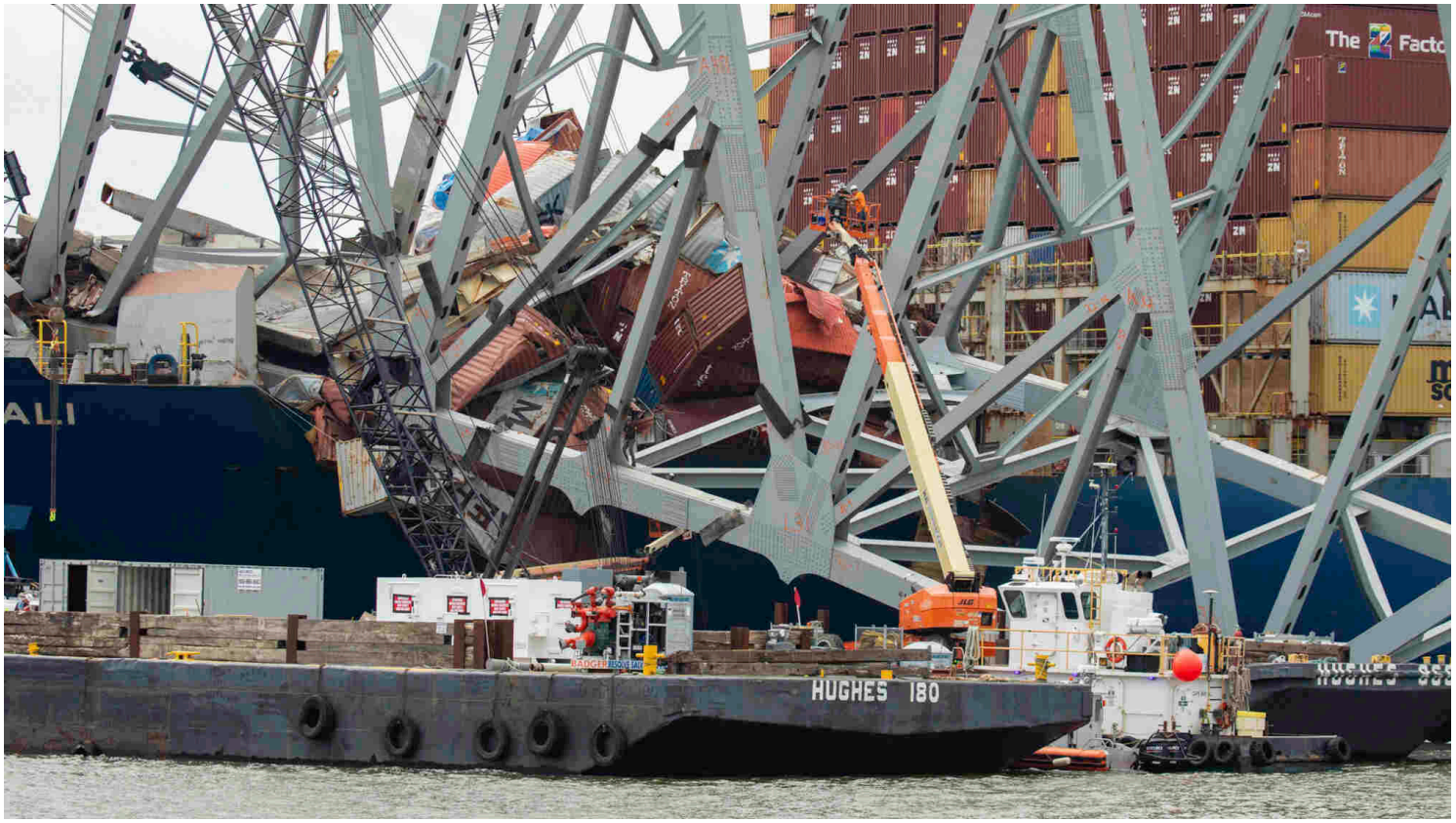

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