

Tow Center for Digital Journalism
A Tow/Knight Report

THE NEW GLOBAL JOURNALISM

FOREIGN CORRESPONDENCE IN TRANSITION

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A Research Project by
The Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University

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Table of Contents:

I. Introduction

By Ann Cooper and Taylor Owen

II. Being There: The Virtual Eyewitness

By Kelly Golnoush Niknejad

III. The Foreign Desk in Transition: A Hybrid Approach to Reporting From There—and Here

By Anup Kaphle

IV. A Toolkit: Eight Tactics for the Digital Foreign Correspondent

By Ahmed Al Omran

V. David Versus Goliath: Digital Resources for Expanded Reporting—and Censoring

By Burcu Baykurt

VI. A Professional Kinship? Blurring the Lines Between International Journalism and Advocacy

By Jessie Graham

VII. Endnotes

Introduction

By Ann Cooper and Taylor Owen

Throughout the twentieth century the core proposition of foreign correspondence was to bear witness—to go places where the audience couldn't and report back on what occurred. Foreign correspondents have long been our interpreters of global events.

Three interrelated trends now challenge this position. First, citizens living through events can tell the world about them directly via a range of digital technologies, without the need for the journalist intermediaries who were essential in the past to report and distribute the news. Second, journalists have the ability to report on some events, particularly breaking news, without physically being there—by immersing themselves in streams of content, whether live video feeds from cell phones, Twitter feeds, or blog posts. Finally, the financial pressures that digital technology have brought to legacy news media have forced many to close their international bureaus. Scores of the traditional foreign correspondents who worked in those bureaus have moved on to other careers, or to new jobs at digitally native media.

In this age of post-legacy media, local reporters, activists, ordinary citizens—and traditional foreign correspondents—are all now using digital technologies to inform the world of breaking news, and to offer analysis and opinions on global trends. In 2012, Columbia Journalism School students profiled this major shift in international reporting, calling the nontraditional forms of coverage they identified [The New Global Journalism](#).¹

The new practices require new skills. The population of experts who report and comment on the news has expanded to include eyewitnesses who can film, or photograph, or write about events and post their work immediately online. Verifying the authenticity of these digital sources has become an important part of the skillset for international reporting. Also newly important is the ability to do immersion social-media reporting. And in this new age of government surveillance, traditional correspondents and new digital reporters must train themselves to use security tools that will keep their work and their sources secure.

In late 2013 the Tow Center gathered several practitioners and students of the new global journalism for a discussion of this changing world. A theme quickly emerged: that “being there,” meaning the hallowed belief that foreign correspondence had to come directly from the eyewitness reporter on the ground, was no longer the only reliable source for reporting from abroad.

In fact, there have always been stories that foreign correspondents have had to find a way to report on without actually “being there.” China’s government, for years, refused to accredit foreign correspondents, so Western news organizations set up listening posts in Hong Kong. Still today, North Korea’s highly restrictive regime forces news organizations to cover the country from South Korea. Similarly, government restrictions

or the high level of physical danger have forced correspondents at times to cover conflicts in Somalia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Syria, and other hot spots from neighboring outposts.

These solutions are limiting and unsatisfying, but in this digital age it's far more possible to do reliable reporting and good analysis without always being on location. A hybrid-reporting project like the site *Tehran Bureau*, based in London and described by its founder in this report, can add depth to our understanding—particularly when reporting on authoritarian regimes.

The digital journalist uses a host of new electronic sources, tools, and practices that are now part of the global reporting landscape. Digital journalists would argue that in the right circumstances, these tools enable them to offer as clear and informed a report as what the journalist on the ground can produce—sometimes even clearer, because they may have access to a broader spectrum of material than a field reporter.

In mainstream newsrooms, though, there is still significant skepticism about digital's impact on foreign reporting. Many see it as the end of the era when a reporter could spend a full day—or days or weeks—reporting in the field before sitting down to write. That traditional foreign correspondent model served audiences well, bringing them vivid accounts of breaking news and nuanced analysis of longer-term developments.

At the Tow Center, we believe that both forms of reporting are vital, that both are necessary to help all of us understand the world. A goal of this report is to narrow or eliminate the divide between the two, and in this spirit we lay out several objectives.

First, our authors work to provide a clear picture of this new reporting landscape: Who are the primary actors, and what does the ecosystem of journalists, citizens, sources, tools, practices, and challenges look like? Second, we urge managers at both mainstream and digital native media outlets to embrace both kinds of reporting, melding them into a new international journalism that produces stories with greater insight. Third, we hope to show the strengths in traditional and digital foreign reporting techniques, with a goal of defining a hybrid foreign correspondent model—not a correspondent who can do everything, but one open to using all reporting tools and a wide range of sources. Finally, we outline governance issues in this new space—legal and operational—with an aim to help journalists report securely and independently in this digital age.

We approach these issues through five chapters, whose authors include journalists from both digital-native and mainstream media, as well as a communications scholar and a media producer for a human rights organization. While each writes from a different vantage, the overlapping insights and conclusions begin to redefine both the edges and heart of international reportage now.

The Virtual Eyewitness

While some doors in legacy media have closed, others have been opened by digital innovators such as Kelly Golnoush Niknejad, who founded *Tehran Bureau* from her

parents' living room in Massachusetts. Starting from a network of contacts she had developed on Yahoo! Messenger and Gchat, Niknejad has developed a vibrant news site on an authoritarian regime, with contributions from a pool of citizen journalists inside the country, as well as from those representing the Iranian diaspora.

Niknejad argues that her model can be more effective than "being there" in an authoritarian regime such as Iran, where foreign correspondents are closely monitored and end up censoring themselves to avoid expulsion. Her model is a vivid example of how new and old media can work together to report in challenging areas.

The Foreign Desk in Transition

There are still legacy foreign desks with traditional foreign correspondents at some major U.S. media. But the legacy newsrooms are also adapting to the digital era. Anup Kaphle, digital foreign editor at the *Washington Post*, describes experiments like *WorldViews*, his paper's international blog, which relies on dispatches from correspondents abroad, as well as pieces by two in-house journalists who never leave Washington to report.

Kaphle also looks at digitally native sites like BuzzFeed, which are opening bureaus in foreign capitals. Their commitment to international news is brand new, but like the legacy foreign desks, they are also grappling with how to shape the foreign desk of the future.

Eight Tactics for the Digital Foreign Correspondent

During the 2011 Arab uprisings in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Syria, the way we learned about and reported on international events was upended. Alongside the CNN cameras shooting from roofs of hotels, citizens were tweeting, posting video to YouTube, and organizing on Facebook. All this information presented enormous challenges: how to make sense of it, and whose reporting could you trust?

To Andy Carvin, at the time a senior product manager for online communities at NPR, these twin problems of context and trust sounded a lot like an opportunity for good journalism. Using traditional values and practices, he set out to monitor the digital information flow and separate fact from rumor and speculation. In doing so, he and his team—including Saudi journalist Ahmed Al Omran—developed practices for verifying sources, making corrections, and dealing with anonymity on social media.

Al Omran, now a correspondent in the *Wall Street Journal's* Saudi Arabia bureau, outlines eight tactics for journalists who want to mine social media and other digital sources for international reporting.

David Versus Goliath

One of the core attributes of the digital media ecosystem is that it is decentralized. Where traditional foreign desks operate as hierarchical organizations with management, editors,

and levels of journalists, the digital media world can sometimes look like the Wild West. This can leave citizen journalists more vulnerable to repressive tactics, including the increased use of digital tools by governments seeking to stifle speech.

One group working through these questions is 140journos, a network of Turkish citizen journalists who are seeking to counterbalance the country's censored national media. Columbia University communications Ph.D. candidate Burcu Baykurt explores what 140journos and others are doing in the new digital space, and what threats they—and more traditional correspondents—face from governments.

A Professional Kinship: Journalism and Advocacy

With media tools like video recording and Internet transmission now widely available, people and institutions all over the globe have the ability to commit journalistic acts. Advocacy organizations such as Human Rights Watch and WITNESS have developed digital skills put to practice with the aim of informing the public—but also aggressively advocating for change.

Jessie Graham, formerly a public radio journalist and now senior media producer at Human Rights Watch, explores the shifting line between journalism and advocacy organizations. Advocates once depended on media to report on their research; now they can reach the public directly. Human Rights Watch and others also hire journalists, particularly photographers, to help with their work. The journalists' reporting may end up on an advocacy website—and in the columns of mainstream media.

Together, the authors of this volume offer a glimpse into the new global, digital journalism. Call them innovators, social media experts, or activists—above all, they are excellent journalists who are redefining reporting in the digital age.

Being There: The Virtual Eyewitness

By Kelly Golnoush Niknejad

At the turn of this century, I started noticing a torrent of messages from Iranian strangers each time I logged into my Yahoo! Messenger account. I was a courts reporter in San Diego and thought the dozens of daily chat requests were coming from up north in Los Angeles, where the largest concentration of Iranians live outside their homeland. But an adjective in one message struck me. “Take a look at my photo,” one guy implored, after several unsuccessful attempts at getting my attention. “I’m really quite ghashangh.”

Ghashangh? The word, meaning pretty in Farsi, was something my grandmother in Tehran might use to describe a young boy. What macho Iranian-American would refer to himself that way?

I wrote back. “Are you in Tehran?” I asked on a hunch.

“Yes,” he said, “aren’t you?”

As it turned out, just about all the messages were streaming in from Iran—and not just Tehran. All were male, most of them very young, in their late teens or early twenties, looking for a date. They didn’t believe I was in the United States and well outside their demographics. Those circumstances made it difficult to have a proper conversation, or ask the kind of questions I wanted as a reporter, but it gave me a fascinating look inside the country.

That digital opening offered me a view into Iran that was more enlightening than any journalism coming out of the country at the time. Five years later, by the time I left for Columbia Journalism School in 2004, I was still watching when a shift occurred: Iranians had started migrating from Yahoo! to Gmail. Now I noticed messages coming from the elite—university students and faculty, even an increasing number from within the cadre of the ruling establishment.

In fact, checking emails one day, I thought it peculiar that two of the bright green circles that lit up on my Gmail instant chat belonged to officials: a relatively high-ranking American and an Iranian one. Though universes apart in distance and ideology, they were next to each other, live in my email account, and easily within my grasp. I began to think of how I, as a journalist, could connect those virtual dots. The result was *Tehran Bureau*, the blog I launched from my parents’ living room in Massachusetts in 2008.

The blog’s name found its genesis in a conversation with David Remnick of *The New Yorker*. Remnick attributed a dearth of in-depth reporting on Iran to a lack of any news organization with “a real bureau there.” *Tehran Bureau* was a response to shrinking foreign news coverage in the United States. It defied tradition. I was not actually in Iran, but thanks to digital reporting tools the blog could tackle media stereotypes and fill in some of the gaps left by newspapers’ scaling back overseas staffs.

As it turned out, the virtual bureau became the new frontline. In a very short time, *Tehran Bureau* went from occupying a small perch on blogspot.com to a partnership with PBS *Frontline*. It now reaches a larger audience at *The Guardian*, where *Tehran Bureau* is hosted on the newspaper's popular website and featured occasionally in print. At its *Guardian* home, a typical *Tehran Bureau* post gets anywhere from 10,000 to 50,000 hits, though some stories—like a recent piece about modeling—drew ten times as much traffic.

During this growth process, *Tehran Bureau* went through another, subtler, but significant change. We went from being thousands of miles away from the story to being there—literally. In time, we transitioned from doing all of our reporting from a U.S. post to growing a huge pool of reporters, editors, and fact-checkers inside the country.

It happened organically, in part because “the old frame for thinking of ‘natives’ who are staying back home and ‘natives’ who have left home doesn’t quite work anymore,” said Iraj Omidvar, an Iranian-American professor who teaches English, technical communication, and media in Atlanta. Thanks to digital technology, “Iranians in Iran and abroad are tied in unprecedented ways that are dramatically changing a wide range of cultural phenomena.” Not the least of which is journalism.

“The Tremor in the Air”

A widely held belief about new media and traditional foreign correspondence suggests that the two are mutually exclusive. On the one hand, a foreign correspondent steeped in the best practices of our profession heads off to cover a war, revolution, or natural disaster in some far-flung place, notebook in hand, ready to bear witness. On the other, a pajama-clad blogger pontificates from an armchair in Maryland about events thousands of miles away. It’s all at his fingertips: the flood of news, images, and video captured by citizen journalists on the ground. Why would you need a correspondent to be there as an eyewitness too?

Well, because, “No search engine gives you the smell of a crime, the tremor in the air, the eyes that smoulder, or the cadence of a scream,” Roger Cohen argued in a [June 2009 column](#) for the *New York Times*, making an eloquent appeal for traditional foreign correspondence.² Cohen had just been ousted from Iran, from where he had continued to report on the violent aftermath of the presidential election even after he was stripped of his press card.

“No news aggregator tells of the ravaged city exhaling in the dusk, nor summons the defiant cries that rise into the night,” Cohen wrote. “No miracle of technology renders the lip-drying taste of fear. No algorithm captures the hush of dignity, nor evokes the adrenalin rush of courage coalescing, nor traces the fresh raw line of a welt.”

No doubt Cohen argued a strong point about being there on the scene, recording everything firsthand. But now, using digital technology, there is another way to grasp the

granular and authentic feel of the streets. This process uses new online tools, not to circumvent the most sacred principles of journalism, but to advance them—especially when reporting on authoritarian countries like Iran, Ethiopia, North Korea, or the United Arab Emirates, to name just a few. New media allows journalists to cast their nets wider than ever in some of the most underreported places in the world.

At *Tehran Bureau* we gather information from ordinary people, charting the trends in society from the ground up. By remaining anonymous and going under the radar, we can penetrate a closed society whose members have largely withdrawn into tight-knit units. We operate without official access, beyond the controls and spin the government uses to manipulate or influence journalists in traditional Tehran bureaus. Thus, new media allows us to do the kind of independent reporting that is virtually impossible for a physical news bureau inside Iran.

The Price of Access

In my first three years as a staff writer for a news service in California and a small newspaper in Massachusetts, I was on the scene of just about every story I covered. It's what made me fall in love with reporting. Once, in those early days, I heard two national reporters at the *Los Angeles Times* commiserating about a new editor. He'd ordered them to report using the phone in all but the most exceptional cases. Sacrilegious, I thought. Even then.

But Los Angeles is not Tehran, or Damascus, or Hanoi, or any of a number of other capitals where governments keep tight reins on foreign correspondents—not to mention their own journalists. The press freedoms enjoyed in American and European societies yield a high level of reliability in the coverage of news in the Western world. Not so when it comes to partially closed societies such as Iran, where foreign correspondents can face a series of obstacles that prevent unfettered newsgathering.

The first hurdle for foreign journalists seeking to cover authoritarian regimes is often the necessity of getting official accreditation from the government. In Iran this can involve long and difficult negotiations with government officials. Those who make it through the accreditation process are then subject to constant monitoring by the government. This is done by requiring visiting reporters to employ minders from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Interviews must be arranged through the minder, who usually sits next to the reporter during these sessions and acts as a translator.

Foreign correspondents often fail to tell their viewers and readers about the omnipresent minders, though some eventually reveal details after they leave their reporting posts. Azadeh Moaveni, an Iranian-American who reported for *Time* magazine from Iran for several years, later admitted to being constantly “trailed by a hook-nosed security agent, bullied to inform on my sources, and threatened with prosecution for ‘endangering national security.’” In her book, *Honeymoon in Tehran*, she describes Mr. X, her secret government minder, as “perhaps the most important person in my Iranian life.”³

There's another layer of control too. Minders have shadow minders, a long-standing practice in Iranian statecraft, where somebody is watching the person watching you—just to make sure that your personal minder does the government's bidding.

For the few foreign journalists with access to the country, the pressures don't end with getting accreditation and having to hire a minder who's on a government payroll. There is always the danger of losing the hard-won government credentials, and to avoid that, it's necessary to self-censor your journalism. This is true for all foreign correspondents, but particularly for Iranians or those with Iranian spouses who are filing from inside the country for foreign news outlets. They work under even greater duress because their families are virtual hostages.

The latest example involved *Washington Post* Tehran correspondent Jason Rezaian, who has dual U.S.-Iranian citizenship, and his journalist wife Yeganeh Salehi, an Iranian citizen. They, along with a dual-nationality photographer, were arrested in July of 2014. The photographer, who was not identified publicly at the family's request, was released a month later, while Rezaian and Salehi remained incarcerated but uncharged. The *Post* described the detentions as evidence of yet another high-level internal political struggle—though in reality they follow a long-standing pattern of dealing with foreign correspondents.

When Nazila Fathi, a local correspondent for the *New York Times*, fled Iran in 2009, she explained how the Iranian establishment was more restrictive with respect to foreign reporting than the domestic press. Certain topics, such as executions, she said, were so sensitive that she was prohibited from writing about them, even though some of their accounts were published in Iranian newspapers. Fathi also learned that Iran's intelligence services draw no line between work and private life. In her case, the government's monitoring extended beyond listening to her calls and reading her emails. As she recounts in a forthcoming memoir, the woman who looked after her toddlers in her home was a government spy.

The experience of *Guardian* correspondent Dan De Luce is illustrative of the cost of bucking the system in countries like Iran. De Luce arrived in Tehran in January of 2003. Like Fathi and Moaveni, he was working there when conditions were actually pretty good. Mohammad Khatami, a reformist, was president. It was a time of relative openness for the press. And yet, even under Khatami it was difficult for a foreign correspondent to cover the country.

"Difficult in a subtle way," De Luce explained to me back then. On the surface there appeared to be a certain openness, but in effect "foreign journalists are on a tight leash by the visa regime," he said. "It's very difficult for a reporter to get into the country, and once in, there is the sensitive matter of getting one's visa renewed every three months. That is a check that discourages journalists from pursuing certain stories."

The government also discourages controversial stories by intimidating the translators and fixers, said De Luce. They're very closely watched, their telephones are tapped, and they

are interrogated by the government on a regular basis. “I knew that whatever I did was going to be an open book.”

Translators have a way of *not* pursuing a correspondent’s story without coming out and saying “no” directly, he explained. Sometimes, even when translators are willing to cross the line, the correspondent may not be willing to take that risk on behalf of the fixer or translator.

Language is another barrier to good reporting. Foreign journalists in Iran or other restrictive countries often do not speak the local language, “so they miss a lot,” said De Luce. “They speak to each other, to other foreigners, and diplomats.” And yet native language skills can also be a hazard. The government is particularly paranoid about Iranian expats, who can pass through the country easily with their Iranian passports and fluent language abilities.

“A lot of what is going on there never sees the light of day,” De Luce said. “What goes on is as mysterious as the goings-on in the Kremlin during the Soviet era.” Add to that the paranoia of the Iranian government, which tends to view foreigners as spies or fomenters of revolution, he offered. And when it comes to its own citizens, the government believes it can operate with impunity. De Luce cited the Iranian-Canadian photojournalist Zahra Kazemi, who was bludgeoned to death in the summer of 2003 while in police custody. That would have never happened to him or another foreigner, he said.

What did happen to De Luce is more typical of the fate of the foreign correspondent who overstepped limits in the former Soviet Union or China. Following the 2003 earthquake in Bam, a city in the Iranian province of Kerman, most correspondents waited in Tehran for earthquake news from formal channels. De Luce and his wife, who wrote for an Irish newspaper, signed up to go to the earthquake region as volunteer rescue workers. Once there, they documented the frustrations and devastation of the earthquake survivors—until the government expelled them. Their crime was being too aggressive in getting the story.

Not one foreign journalist based in Tehran was willing to protest his expulsion, said De Luce; all were too concerned with maintaining their own access. He understands, though. Is it such a success to be “really gung ho” and get kicked out and not report anything at all, he asks, or, “Isn’t it better to have someone there?” De Luce’s response: There is no right answer.

Going Vertical

Playing by the rules may lead to flawed reporting, but it gets at “one version of the truth,” said a former foreign editor at a major U.S. newspaper. But that’s a shaky argument. When the self-censored reporting of a Tehran-based foreign correspondent is published by a mainstream newspaper of record, and cited widely, it becomes much more than just one competing strain of a story. In fact, until the recent proliferation of blogs, that one

self-censored version was often the only one that filled the news vacuum.

I'm not advocating that news organizations abandon foreign bureaus in authoritarian countries—only that they supplement their reporting from those places and use their websites as platforms to present deeper work and multiple voices that don't all fit in the daily print paper.

Bill Rempel, a former senior editor and investigative reporter at the *Los Angeles Times*, once told me that ideally he'd like big news developments from Iran reported independently, by separate reporters, even if they turned up different stories or conclusions. Rempel said the stories could play side by side, so that readers could take a look and make up their own minds.

Using new digital tools and resources makes that possible and affordable. And doing it means we no longer have to accept self-censored, misleading reporting, like the kind that helped Khatami—the president when Dan De Luce was thrown out of Iran—receive such glowing coverage from foreign correspondents who played by the rules.

Reading the news during the Khatami era, I felt there was a gap between what I saw in mainstream media here and public opinion in Iran. I took up this theme in my master's project at Columbia Journalism School. The problems I encountered helped explain why I thought I was getting a clearer and more nuanced picture reporting on Iran from New York.

My not being there had distinct advantages in the Internet age, when technology opened up many new avenues of communication and allowed new voices to be heard. In [an article for Nieman Reports](#) a few months after *Tehran Bureau* was launched, I explained that one of my primary motivations in setting up “the virtual Iran beat” was to assemble a staff of reporters and editors who spoke Farsi.⁴ This meant we could tap into a more extensive network and speak to more Iranians, even if we were not based in Tehran. And free of the filters that limit Internet access from within Iran, we could read Iranian bloggers—those who write in Iran and those who live in exile.

That was the idea, anyway. Before the 2009 post-election crackdown, there were hundreds, perhaps thousands of people, blogging about Iran. Most were very opinionated, but even blogs with a strong point of view could be useful for possible story leads or a different perspective on an issue. When Iran's internal factional war spilled into the open, even more valuable information began to appear online—often posted by one faction seeking to discredit another. *Tehran Bureau* was well positioned to scan this wide range of views, along with the Iranian press, to help inform the reporting by our staff.

To date, the online resources for us are relatively rich because Iranians are as much plugged in online as any developed society. As the academic Omidvar explained, “Networked digital media is permitting conversations that could never have taken place before, between people who would have never come into contact with each other, with often dramatic results that no one could have possibly predicted adequately.”

Toolkit Nuts and Bolts

Before launching *Tehran Bureau*, I set out to meet as many Iranians as I could. Since I emigrated from Iran in 1984, I had lived, worked, or spent a lot of time in cities with large Iranian communities like San Diego, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Berkeley, London, and Dubai. I knew that ties between south Iran and what is now the United Arab Emirates stretch back hundreds of years, with waves of migration that started long before the 1979 revolution. Today there is a crosscurrent of Iranians heading to the Emirates, and though they are largely middle class they offer a greater mix of opinions than you might find in your social circles in Tehran. Most of them retain close ties to the motherland. At *Tehran Bureau*, most of us are part of that kind of virtual community, giving us a rich network to mine—as we did, thanks to new media, during the heavily contested 2009 election and its bloody aftermath.

I launched the blog in November of 2008. The choice to use a blog format was a budget issue; I had no money to create a more complex website, but from its beginning *Tehran Bureau* was designed to publish reported stories, not thought pieces or opposition rants.

Our first dispatch from Tehran was a reaction to President Obama's election victory. It was cited by ABC News and the BBC World Service. *Tehran Bureau* went into syndication soon thereafter. The first news organization to buy one of our stories was the *New York Times*—all before the Iranian presidential election in June of 2009.

In February of that year, back in Boston, my sister brought up a name I hadn't heard in twenty-five years. "Do you remember her?" she asked. "She was a classmate. She found me on Facebook. See if you can find her." When I found this former classmate on Facebook, I came across other mutual friends, many of them long-lost classmates from the time of the Iran-Iraq war. I'd already been on Facebook for about three years and had found a few profiles that appeared to have been posted from Tehran.

Four months before the election, these new profiles from my classmates turned out to be part of a much larger wave—so large that it felt as if the whole of the Islamic Republic had joined Facebook overnight. I followed the presidential campaign in part via status updates on Facebook. It was like having a front row seat. One contact was working for opposition candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi and had an insider's view of much of what was happening. The first signs of trouble came when that contact reported an attack on the opposition candidate's headquarters on the eve of the vote. And when YouTube videos of demonstrations began spreading via Facebook, an Iranian neighbor was the first to alert me.

I took to Twitter once our website was taken down by a powerful denial-of-service (DoS) attack in June of 2009, presumably by an Iranian government proxy. The incumbent regime of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had declared victory (which many deemed fraudulent) and now needed to cut off the election coverage in English; it did so swiftly by canceling journalists' visas or confining correspondents based there to their offices. Safely outside,

I could continue to get the story out. Even when the wrath of the regime spread through cyberspace, news continued to trickle in via email, Skype, instant chat—even, occasionally, the telephone. Text is relatively safe and easy to get out, even when the Internet slows to a crawl.

Though limited to micro-blogging, I didn't want to do away with gritty details or pare harrowing accounts down to one-hundred-forty characters. On Twitter, I used full quotes and punctuated as much as possible. I indicated when a quote came to an end, or when a story would be carried by successive tweets. I reported these accounts from some of my most trusted sources in the network I'd built. I avoided tweets from random strangers.

Actually, at that time, few Iranians were on Twitter, though the often-used term “Twitter Revolution” did aptly capture the moment. Twitter was social networking stripped down to its most fundamental. Reports came out in YouTube videos and firsthand accounts from other channels making their way to that narrow intersection. And it was on Twitter that some in the media already had a listening post.

Tehran Bureau's Twitter reporting on the elections and the aftermath was cobbled into narratives on the *New York Times' Lede* blog and Andrew Sullivan's *The Dish*. Our Twitter feed @TehranBureau went from a few hundred followers to 19,000 in two days. There are more than 45,000 now, though I rarely tweet anymore.

Tehran Bureau's election coverage in 2009 is a typical example of how mainstream and new media are coming together in journalism. Twitter and other social media have become an integral part of getting the news out when a major event erupts somewhere in the world. But what if that kind of synergy were systematic and employed more broadly, beyond breaking news? What would it unearth? What could it mean for investigative reporting in closed societies?

That's still a largely untapped idea. Citizen journalism played an important role in Iran's 2009 crisis, but when the story went underground, the citizens reporting it did too. They generally lack the necessary perspective and investigative techniques to continue chronicling events in a meaningful way. These skills remain crucial—perhaps even more crucial—when the story is no longer on the street in the form of riots or demonstrations.

In Iran, the number of people able to report credibly from the inside diminished significantly over the course of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's second term. Those with ties outside the country left. Inside Iran, the ability of journalists to gather and disseminate news was greatly hampered by the state's ongoing crackdown on the press. But equally significant was the lack of Iranian journalists trained in international standards of reporting.

To continue and expand reporting from the ground, *Tehran Bureau* launched “Iran Standard Time.” Adapted from the *Washington Post's* “Time Zones,” it offers a view into a doctor's life, a taxi ride, and other aspects of everyday life inside the Islamic Republic. We also expanded the commentary and analysis section, which may have allowed more

opinion to seep through, but it also helped give context to a complex story that wouldn't have been available otherwise. We have also devoted a large section to translating Farsi-language news sites. In the tumultuous post-election climate, the Iranian blogosphere was often the best place to read between the lines and figure out what was going on; it's where we learned, for example, that hardline factions were going after each other in public once their reformist targets were in jail or otherwise silenced.

The hardest and most rewarding part of the job is to discover and foster new talent, especially at a distance. Traditional online training programs aimed at Iranian journalists often don't succeed in teaching how to report accurately and ethically. One problem is that many of the journalists who undergo training are set in their ways and too proud to take instruction. Another is that the training programs financed by Western governments, including the United States, often just aren't organized effectively.

At *Tehran Bureau*, I'm trying to get around some of those obstacles with a peer-to-peer training program. This way we can calibrate the instruction to the level of the student. By pairing students with seasoned practitioners, we try to produce professional content from the start. Translators, who may be journalists in their own right, assist or take active part in these working groups to bridge any language gaps and provide an extra layer of reporting.

To keep everyone safe, we work anonymously—a policy that may be viewed as anathema to good journalism. Iran operates on anonymity, though. And for our correspondents, it's essential for security. The openness and transparency that make for good reporting practices in New York or Washington, D.C. are meaningless in Tehran—even, I would argue, reckless.

As we expand the network, we recruit trusted reporters in different neighborhoods, and eventually regions, with access to different strata of society. Even though our correspondents don't know each other, we can collaborate on stories through our shared link outside the country. If a new reporter has a scoop, I can simultaneously assign the same story to a second reporter with whom I have worked and trust. The two reports may overlap and complement each other; if they don't, we try to figure out why, a process that may add more nuance to the reporting. Or, it may convince us that the story is flawed and not useable.

Rather than framing journalism in the traditional newsgathering mold, which focuses on the policy announcements of the ruling elite, *Tehran Bureau* covers Iran from the bottom up. Our correspondents usually don't have the press credentials required to attend government press conferences and conduct interviews with high-level policymakers, but they have unrivaled access to, and understanding of, the often unpredictable society in which they live. This is not citizen journalism; this is professional journalism, done undercover. They use notebooks and pens. They don't carry cameras or other conspicuous equipment. Emails cloaked with aliases provide additional cover.

More Left Undone

Still, we've only scratched the surface, hindered not by the government of Iran but by lack of funding. The biggest obstacle to our reporting has been, and remains, money. We're not a think tank and don't fill a policy prescription. Because we accept no money from any government, religious faction, or interest group, it effectively cuts us off from some of the richest sources of funding, including the U.S. government. Although we work hard to stay above the political or ideological fray, most big foundations are reluctant to support us because of the contentious subject matter. And as a board member at one of these prominent organizations in New York put it to me, "You'll never get funding because you're Iranian."

I have been fortunate to eke out a salary, first from PBS *Frontline* and now from *The Guardian*, where we became part of the paper's website in early 2013. "While serious independent journalism remains nearly impossibly in Iran," *The Guardian* said in announcing our arrival, "[Tehran Bureau] is able to provide original reporting throughout its extensive list of contacts both inside and outside the republic, and to bring the voices of ordinary people to an international audience."⁵

I make our small budget stretch as far as it will go to pay editors, writers, and, when possible, translators—most of whom have generously donated their time to make it possible to pay more reporters. We are still looking for long-term funding for what has already proven to be a valuable journalistic enterprise; the journalists who work for us need other jobs, too, to survive.

In the meantime, according to editor and correspondent Oliver August of *The Economist*, Iran remains "the most underreported country in the world." It doesn't have to be that way, however, said Omidvar, the Atlanta professor. "There is a massive, untapped—but tappable—pool of Iranian talent for collecting, distributing, and evaluating information on," he said. And with the right combination of online technologies and journalistic skill, it can be done in ways that "apparatuses of repression would never be able to counter."

A Toolkit: Eight Tactics for the Digital Foreign Correspondent

By Ahmed Al Omran

Since the earliest days of journalism, new technologies have periodically changed reporting, accelerating how we transmit information. (Think the telegraph, telex, telephone, and satellite transmission.) Digital technologies have changed the speed equation yet again, bringing new benefits and challenges.

As we've witnessed in the last few years, speedier transmission pushes some journalists to prioritize being first—over being accurate—with the aim of scoring an exclusive story. “It’s more difficult to verify what’s true and what may be shockingly false,” [wrote CNN](#) in a 2009 article about false social media reports of celebrity deaths.⁶ This was nearly four years before CNN and other major U.S. news organizations [rushed to break “news” in the Boston Marathon bombing](#), only to learn the sources they relied upon were wrong.⁷

Perhaps the most profound impact on reporting is the opportunity that digital technologies give to people everywhere to commit “random acts of journalism,” as former NPR senior strategist Andy Carvin put it. Anyone who witnesses a breaking news event can, with the right digital tools and Internet access, report on it instantly to the world. With all the firsthand information flooding onto YouTube, Twitter, and other platforms, the question of where this leaves professional journalists is one we deal with daily. Internationally, it gives correspondents more potential sources than ever before. It also demands that they take greater responsibility for verifying their reporting, for being transparent about their newsgathering techniques, and for correcting their mistakes.

What follows are eight tactics—all based on traditional reporting principles but adapted to new technology—to help the foreign correspondent remain reliable, trustworthy, and authoritative in the digital age.

Finding Sources

When I began working at NPR in the summer of 2011, we were several months into a series of popular uprisings in the Middle East. Tunisian president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali had fled his country in January, and Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak was ousted in February. By the time I arrived, NPR’s senior strategist, Andy Carvin, had already made a name for himself as a pioneer using social media to cover these uprisings. “The man who tweeted the revolution,” [The Guardian called him](#).⁸ *Columbia Journalism Review* described Carvin as [“a living, breathing real-time verification system.”](#)⁹

What garnered him all the attention was that Carvin was not a traditional foreign correspondent sending news directly from Tahrir Square, but a Twitter maven who did his reporting from NPR’s D.C. headquarters. Carvin didn’t replace NPR’s on-the-ground correspondents, of course, but his work complemented theirs. And he showed that it was possible, perhaps for the first time, to do serious reporting on a revolution without actually being there.

My job was to assist in this novel form of journalism as we sought to cover new crises in that Arab Spring. Another uprising had begun in Syria in March. By the summer of 2011, what had started as peaceful protest was descending into an increasingly bloody civil war. The Syrian regime made it almost impossible for foreign correspondents to enter the country, but the mounting death toll and huge political implications meant that the story could not be ignored. I was tasked with covering it, without leaving NPR's offices, just as Carvin had covered Tunisia and Egypt.

Despite the regime's restrictions, social media and the Internet were awash in videos, photos, and reports of events happening inside Syria. Most came from activists or ordinary citizens who opposed the regime of Bashar al-Assad. It was clear their reports could not merely be taken at face value. I had to figure out which sources were supplying reliable information—verifiable images and accurate descriptions of what was going on thousands of miles and several time zones to the east of where I was working.

As with any beat, the first step was to learn all I could—to read widely about the conflict and Syrian history, making note of the names and roles of newsmakers, and talking to a range of people with expertise on Syria and how the conflict was unfolding. I began with a community I already knew: Syrian bloggers and activists, whom I had come to know in the mid-2000s when I created an English-language blog, *Saudi Jeans*, in Saudi Arabia. At that time, blogging was just taking off in the Middle East and we were a small band of Arab writers who quickly became acquainted—first online, and later in person at conferences across the region and abroad.

There were only a handful of Syrian bloggers, and those I knew were critical of the regime; in fact, as their blogging put them at increased risk of arrest, most were forced to leave the country.

I reached out to these writers, and our early conversations helped me understand the Syrian protests and pointed me to other sources of reliable reporting. Social networks, particularly Twitter, had become popular, and by following and engaging with people deeply immersed in the story, I could keep up to date with developments and their significance.

But if you don't start out with a network of contacts, as I did, how do you find sources and determine their reliability? There are several reporting techniques and tools that can help.

Tactic 1: Follow the Experts

Regardless of where the story is, there are a few foreign editors who are always worth following on Twitter because they excel at keeping up with international news and analysis across the globe. These include Politico's [Blake Hounshell](#)¹⁰ and BuzzFeed's [Miriam Elder](#).¹¹ Robert Mackey of the *New York Times* does an excellent job curating social media content on all kinds of breaking news, including international stories.¹² The Electronic Frontier Foundation's [Jillian C. York](#) follows Internet freedom issues around

the world,¹³ while [Zeynep Tufekci](#) of the University of North Carolina offers smart insights on how technology intersects with social phenomena like protest and political change, a common theme in many contemporary conflicts.¹⁴

On a specific story, though, you also need to follow the tweets of local reporters, activists, and citizens on the ground. Look for names in the initial research you do. One of the noticeable patterns on Twitter is that whenever a major breaking news event begins overseas, experts and foreign news geeks who already know that region immediately start retweeting sources with whom they are familiar. That doesn't mean everything they cite is reliable, but their sources are worth a good look and an investment of shoe leather (or thumb taps) to check out what they report.

In the Syrian uprising, I quickly found and followed experts on the country like [Randa Slim](#),¹⁵ [Andrew Tabler](#),¹⁶ [Rime Allaf](#),¹⁷ and [Joshua Landis](#).¹⁸ I also looked for journalists who were covering the story like [Rania Abouzeid](#),¹⁹ [Liz Sly](#),²⁰ [Maisa Akbik](#),²¹ and [Javier Espinosa](#).²² I followed activists inside and outside the country. Some were known, like [Rami Jarrah](#)²³ and [Mohammed Al Abdullah](#).²⁴ Others tweeted anonymously, but over time I was able to verify the reliability of those like [BSyria](#)²⁵ and [THE 47th](#).²⁶ Eventually, I pulled all these sources and others together into a Twitter list that helped me follow the story over time.

Tactic 2: Know Local Digital Customs

It's important to know which sites and platforms are popular in the countries you're covering and how these sites are used there. Twitter and Facebook are both widely used in the Middle East, for example, while WeChat and LINE are more popular in Asia. Within the Middle East, there are differences from country to country. In Egypt, for example, the government and the military typically use their Facebook pages, and not their official sites, to make announcements and release statements, while activists and journalists rely on Twitter.

Compare that with Saudi Arabia, where the culture is more oriented to the spoken word than to writing and reading. Twitter is by far the most-used platform for breaking and discussing the country's news, followed by mobile apps like WhatsApp. Saudi Arabia has more Twitter users per capita than any other country, and the local twittersphere buzzes with everything from breaking news, to debates on religion's role in public life, to the minutiae of football matches.

Then there's China, where the government blocks Facebook and Twitter. The domestic microblogging platform Weibo is a lively social media platform and venue for dissent, though WeChat has stolen some of its following because it's [less subject to government censorship](#)—at least so far.²⁷

Understanding these local differences among platforms and who uses them is one key to finding reliable sources and information. Another key is seeking good search tools.

Tactic 3: Use Data Management Tools

On the tools side, creating Twitter lists and filtered searches focused on specific events and beats in apps like [TweetDeck](#) can help you follow important stories as they evolve.²⁸ This is essential on busy news days, when events move so quickly that it's difficult to identify relevant tweets among the flood of information (which can be exacerbated by commercial spammers trying to take advantage of news events for marketing purposes). For example, when anti-government protests began in Ukraine in February of 2014, the news verification startup Storyful posted a list of Twitter accounts to follow to keep up to date with the latest from there. Storyful has similar lists for different countries and beats, from topics like [South Africa](#)²⁹ to [wildfires](#).³⁰

A tool that can help assess a Twitter source's trustworthiness is [Twiangulate](#), a site that allows you to find the common followers of two Twitter users.³¹ For example, you can compare the followers of a source you already know and trust with the followers of a new source you just found. If the two share many of the same followers, then there is a good chance that the new source is one worth following—though you'll still want to do additional verification. While following the 2011–2012 protests in Kuwait, for example, I used [Twiangulate to cross-reference some new Twitter users](#) I came across before deciding whether to follow or retweet them.³² I used the same method to vet new sources while following the news of protests by the Shia minority in eastern Saudi Arabia.

Once you have found and connected with new sources, contact them via Twitter direct message, communicate with them using IM apps, use Skype to video chat, or call them by mobile phone to talk. I relied on old-fashioned telephone technology when covering Syria because the Internet infrastructure in the country is weak, especially in the hottest conflict zones. In these cases, I used digital media to ask the sources for their phone numbers, then called them and recorded interviews. Later we used some of these audio conversations in NPR broadcasts and on the website.

NPR has advanced equipment to record audio, but new smartphones can get the job done when needed. News organizations can configure apps such as Report-IT to allow their sources to record their end of the interviews and then send the audio via the Internet's File Transfer Protocol (FTP). Sources can also use an app like DropVox to record sound, and then upload it to Dropbox.

Verifying Information

In April of 2013, the annual Boston Marathon was interrupted when two pressure-cooker bombs exploded, killing three people and injuring over two-hundred and fifty others. In the hours following the attack, a tsunami of news, rumor, and speculation flooded social media as authorities worked to identify suspects.

On the Web, users of the popular online community Reddit led their own crowdsourcing effort to find the suspects. That effort wrongly named two people. One of them, a college student who had disappeared earlier, was eventually found dead in the Providence River.

He had no connection whatsoever to the bombing, but Reddit's mistake ensured that his family suffered through a nasty, hostile media frenzy—a [tragic tale](#) and a sober reminder that verification is at the heart of all good journalism, regardless of the information's source.³³

Digital technology has made that especially true during breaking news events, when false information and rumors can travel rapidly and widely. Several tools can help journalists assess what they're watching and seeing.

Tactic 4: Corroborate Before You Go Public

One verification tool is Storyful's free [Chrome extension](#), which can quickly and efficiently search multiple social networks with preset filters to find the best image, video, and text results around certain keywords and news events.³⁴ Cross-referencing information posted on these different sites can be useful to verify this information.

Some resources are available online to help journalists learn more techniques to ensure that you get the story right before sharing it. One of them is the [Verification Handbook](#) by the European Journalism Centre (EJC).³⁵ It provides step-by-step guidelines for using content found on social media during emergencies and crisis situations. Another resource is the [Citizen Evidence Lab](#) by Amnesty International, where you can find tutorials and case studies about using video and photos for reporting.³⁶

Context is also key, especially in the case of verifying the authenticity of photos and video. Is there evidence they have been altered? Can you identify the location by seeing buildings or landmarks? Misidentified, altered, or faked images seem to emerge from every major international story these days; journalists who don't take care to identify them can end up spreading deception and destroying their professional credibility. If you see a picture and don't know its sourcing, don't trust—verify.

Here's how you can try to do that: Every photo taken by a digital camera or a mobile phone comes with a set of data known as "Exchangeable image file format," or Exif for short. This data can include information about the type of camera that captured the photograph. Exif data can also sometimes reveal the last piece of software used to save the image, as well as the image's location and time stamp. Tools like [Jeffrey's Exif Viewer](#) can help you in the verification of photos, as it displays date, time, and location data for the photos that people share on social media.³⁷ If the Exif data is not available, use [Google Reverse Image Search](#)³⁸ or [TinEye](#)³⁹ to check the past life of the photo.

In the case of video, make sure its timestamp matches the weather reported for the date and time. If there are people speaking in the video, note their accents. If you are unsure, [ask people who follow you on Twitter for help](#).⁴⁰ Here's an example of Andy Carvin using Twitter for verification, and one of the responses he received.



Andy Carvin @acarvin · 8 Jun 2012

Please use universalsubtitles.org to caption the video. Need to confirm location and ID accents if possible. youtu.be/mS_vjw1jo9c

Details

Reply Retweet Favorite More



Omeima Alaqeel

@OmeimaY



Follow

@acarvin dialect unclear, but sounds like northern; on the Syrian/Turkish border. Mostly curses and they cheering each other to carry on

Reply Retweet Favorite More

RETWEETS

3



4:29 PM - 8 Jun 2012

Carvin wanted to confirm the location of where a video had been taken. He asked his followers for help, and several of them volunteered. After he received several answers, he retweeted what he believed was the most informed one.

One of the best known practitioners of this kind of open-source investigation is Eliot Higgins, who writes the *Brown Moses* blog about the Syrian conflict. Higgins' focus is on munitions used in the war. He came to the subject with no prior expertise. His reporting combines obsessive scrutiny of online videos and photos posted by Syrians with appeals for input from his Facebook and Twitter followers. ([“Anyone know what the guy in this video is saying?”](#))⁴¹

Of course, the best sources for verification come from a network of reliable contacts built up *before* a story breaks. In the heat of fast-paced news, the pressure is high and mistakes can be harmful, even dangerous. In these situations, journalists need to pause and ask how essential or urgent is the piece of information, and how can they take more steps to verify it before it gets published. Always ask, have we made every effort to reach authoritative sources? Are there more ways to reach out?

Tactic 5: Pick Up The Telephone

During the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome virus outbreak in Saudi Arabia in 2014, I found plenty of information on Twitter and Facebook that contradicted the government's insistence that the situation was under control. On social media, though, there was a sense of panic. My challenge was to verify the tweets and posts I was reading.

I started by combing through both platforms, looking for doctors and nurses working in hospitals that were treating victims. When I found names, I picked up the telephone and called them. While digital media provided me with leads, traditional technology connected me to firsthand, knowledgeable sources who could speak in detail about the situation in their hospitals. By talking to healthcare workers and hearing their accounts, I had a better understanding of the situation on the ground and presented a more accurate take on the crisis than what Saudis were learning from either the government or social media rumor mills.

On Facebook, you can search specifics using the site's powerful social graph search. To use it, go to the search box and type a description, such as: "Nurses who work in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia" or "Doctors who work in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia." You can even focus the search further, as I did by choosing a specific hospital where the outbreak happened: "Nurses who work at King Fahad Hospital in Jeddah." The site will return a list of users who match this description, and then you can contact them by sending them a Facebook message asking to talk. As for Twitter, you can search the website for keywords and phrases. In my case I started with words that indicated panic about the disease outbreak, and from there started looking for users who worked in hospitals and asked to speak with them.

This takes time and effort, and it doesn't always yield results. But in the case of the virus story, some health workers did respond to my requests and they offered important context for [some of the stories](#) we wrote about the disease for the *Wall Street Journal*.⁴²

Working Transparently

Be honest. Don't lie. Attribute properly. These may sound like basic rules every journalist should follow, but they are doubly important in an age when information assaults us from all sides.

Journalists should not distribute information that they cannot verify. If they want to use social media in the process of vetting, they should clearly acknowledge that the information is unverified and they are seeking help or comment from others who may be able to confirm or debunk it. Pay attention to the language used by others when they report the news, and be careful how you convey information, because [words matter](#).⁴³ Be transparent about how you acquired information and how you went about verifying it.

When I was covering the Syrian uprising for NPR in 2012, I found myself correcting some of my followers who thought I was tweeting from battlefields in the Middle East,

asking me about specific things or [wishing me to stay safe](#).⁴⁴ “Thanks,” I would reply to them, “but I’m actually tweeting from the comfort of my office in Washington, D.C.”



Sandy Dover @sandinbrick · 6 Feb 2012

@ahmed I am sorry you are in such danger, sigh

[Details](#)

[Reply](#) [Retweet](#) [Favorite](#) [More](#)



Ahmed Al Omran

@ahmed

@sandinbrick I'm safe in Washington DC, that was translation for someone's message from Homs, Syria.

[Reply](#) [Delete](#) [Favorite](#) [More](#)

6:59 AM - 6 Feb 2012

Being transparent about your location and sourcing is essential for credibility and trust. Moreover, journalists should make it easy for the audience to find out more about them and their backgrounds by providing links to their bios and previous work.

Finally, as a reporter, don’t be afraid to show your human side on social media. Tweeting a link to a music video you like or posting a photo you took during a walk on a sunny summer day reminds your audience that you have a life beyond work, just as they do. It can help them relate to you, and to your more serious work.

Tactic 6: Own Your Errors

Even after making every effort to identify sources, verify information, and double-check copy, mistakes can still happen. And when reporting and publishing are done in real time, as in the case of live-tweeting, the chances of error are higher.

Journalists should be readily accountable for their mistakes, acknowledging and correcting them as quickly and as clearly as possible. If the error appeared on Twitter, Facebook, and your own website, the correction must also appear in all of these places.

Responsibility doesn't stop with your own errors. If you are a reporter following a story on Twitter and you see misinformation being published, you need to jump into the conversation and correct it. Unfortunately, [Twitter does not make it easy to correct errors and rumors](#), but journalists should do their best to fight the spread of misinformation—especially on their beats and within the stories they are covering.⁴⁵ People who have retweeted or shared an erroneous post you made may not see your subsequent correction unless you reach out to them individually. Check for retweets, likes, or re-shares and then make sure everyone who spread your error gets a copy of the correction.

That's harder to do if a tweet has been widely retweeted. One method for dealing with Twitter mistakes is to issue the correction as a reply to the original erroneous tweet, as [Slate](#) did when it posted a photo of Javier Bardem in a tweet about Russian president Vladimir Putin.⁴⁶

In June of 2014, a BBC journalist tweeted a screenshot of a tweet from someone he identified as "Saudi Human Rights Minister." I replied to him with a correction: Saudi Arabia doesn't have a human rights ministry.

The journalist later posted a correction, but while his original tweet was retweeted more than seventy-five times, his correction was only retweeted four.



Mehrzad Kohanrouz @MehrzedBBC · Jun 18
This says a lot - #Saudi HUMAN RIGHTS minister: "May God rid us of the evil of Shia Muslims&Christians" pic.twitter.com/tknUTkrMyv @DEsfandiary



Ahmed Al Omran @ahmed
@MehrzedBBC @DEsfandiary
@blakehounshell this is not Saudi human rights minister. Actually, there is no ministry for human rights in Saudi.

3:39 AM - 18 Jun 2014



Mehrzad Kohanrouz @MehrzedBBC
This says a lot - #Saudi HUMAN RIGHTS minister: "May God rid us of the evil of Shia Muslims&Christians"
pic.twitter.com/tknUTkrMyv @DEsfandiary



Mehrzad Kohanrouz @MehrzedBBC
CORRECTION - He's a member of HR commission not minister..

3:22 AM - 18 Jun 2014

Securing Your Work

Journalists have a responsibility to keep sources safe from the risks posed by using the Internet for communications. An application like Skype may be a great way to reach

someone in a far-off place, but it may also give a repressive government or other hostile party an opportunity to spy on that source.

Tactic 7: Keep Your Sources Safe

The [Journalist Security Guide](#), published by the Committee to Protect Journalists, in essence advises that we “think before contacting.”

Many journalists feel that what they are doing is largely transparent, and that they have nothing to hide. But think about the dangers to sources if the information they have provided to you was more widely known. What may seem innocuous personal information to you might be incriminatory to others.⁴⁷

[Information security](#) issues are addressed at length in CPJ’s handbook,⁴⁸ and in [reports from Internews](#)⁴⁹ and other organizations that outline practical steps for using encryption, avoiding hacks, and steering clear of suspicious links to protect sourcing, your own equipment and information. However, technology and software change all the time so it is very important to think about these changes and how to keep sources—and yourself—safe.

When I started blogging in Saudi Arabia in 2004 I only used my first name, out of fear for my security. But a few weeks after I began, I realized that my security effort was deeply flawed: I’d already revealed other information about myself on the blog, such as where I was going to school, making it fairly easy for someone to figure out all my credentials. Eventually, I decided to use my full name and real identity, because I thought it would encourage people to take the blog more seriously.

As my site grew more known, both inside and outside Saudi Arabia, it became clear that having a high profile actually offered some protection. If authorities arrest an anonymous blogger, it can go unnoticed. But if you are well known and get arrested, people will know—possibly leading to protests on your behalf and pressure on the government to release you. While I tried to keep a balanced tone on the blog, despite my efforts the government eventually contacted my family to express its displeasure with what I was writing. I kept on blogging anyway, until I moved to the United States a few months later to study journalism.

Now, back in Saudi Arabia, I report for the *Wall Street Journal*. I have the support and resources of a major international media organization, which enables me to tackle more serious stories than I could as an individual blogger. But it also means my work is more carefully scrutinized by authorities than the blog, *Saudi Jeans*, ever was. I remind myself regularly that when reporting digitally, my sources may be operating in a more dangerous legal, technical, and security context than I am. Before making contact, I consider my responsibility for knowing what risks they face just for communicating with me.

Tactic 8: Remember That Everything Changes

The skills foreign correspondents employ and the tools they use may have changed over the years, but the essence of the job remains the same. Even as the world becomes increasingly connected, journalists continue to provide an important service in explaining global events and giving us a better understanding of what is happening, why, and what the consequences are.

But just as the telex replaced the telegraph, and cell phones are displacing landlines, new tools will emerge in international reporting. Whatever form those tools may take, whatever benefits they may offer, correspondents need to use them with the same principles that apply today: Verify everything *before* you publish; be transparent about your work; keep yourself and your sources secure.

The Foreign Desk in Transition: A Hybrid Approach to Reporting From There—and Here

By Anup Kaphle

When the *Washington Post*'s new owner, Jeff Bezos, met the newsroom for the first time in October of 2013, he spent more than an hour fielding questions from a staff curious to gauge the Amazon founder's plans for the one hundred thirty seven-year-old newspaper. During the session, Bezos mentioned two recent *Post* stories that he found particularly intriguing.

The first was a human-interest feature on the death of a bar bouncer, the kind of richly descriptive narrative that has been a *Post* hallmark for decades. But Bezos' other favorite was something of a surprise: a [2,800-word piece](#) published in the *Post*'s foreign affairs blog, headlined "9 questions about Syria you were too embarrassed to ask."⁵⁰

Conceived and reported in Washington by a *Post* digital journalist, and written for an online audience, the Syria piece addressed readers in a conversational tone rarely, if ever, used in traditional foreign reporting. If you "aren't exactly sure why Syria is fighting a civil war, or even where Syria is located," wrote blogger Max Fisher, "this is the article for you." No need to feel embarrassed, he continued. "What's happening in Syria is really important, but it can also be confusing and difficult to follow even for those of us glued to it."⁵¹

Even without the newsroom plug from Bezos, "9 questions" was already grabbing attention inside and outside the *Post*. In the two months after it first appeared on *WorldViews*, the blog that is one of the paper's main experiments in international digital journalism, "9 questions" got over five-million page views. Compare that to the potential audience for a top international story in the printed newspaper: About 475,000 subscribers receive it, and on a good day it might get another 100,000 page views online.

So, is "9 questions" the future of international news: breezy, digital-first, and written by someone in an office thousands of miles from the scene? Perhaps the best answer is, it's a piece of the hybrid that is foreign news reporting today at the *Post* and other mainstream organizations committed to serious international coverage.

Traditional foreign correspondents remain at the heart of that hybrid, filing vivid, detailed, firsthand reporting from the field. Now, they also fill frequent online updates on major breaking news. But in-house journalists who don't leave the office are also a part of the foreign report. In at least two legacy newsrooms, the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, these digital journalists are daily contributors, aggregating, curating, and yes, doing original reporting—for *WorldViews* at the *Post*, and for the *New York Times'* Open Source column by Robert Mackey and Watching Syria's War.

I am a digital foreign editor at the *Post*, where we call *WorldViews* a blog. The *Times* labels Open Source a column, while the URL for Watching Syria's War uses the term

project. The varied labels give some hint at the uncertainty that hangs over traditional foreign desks in this transitional age. Each of those digital features offers interesting, innovative reporting. Each is part of mainstream's push to expand international reporting beyond the traditional foreign-correspondent model and appeal to more online readers. But whether these new models will prove as durable as the traditional correspondent depends on factors that foreign desks didn't have to worry about in the past: Can they draw a strong, sustainable audience? And can they play a part in solving the economic crisis that has caused so many mainstream organizations to axe their foreign bureaus?

Shuttered Bureaus

A [report published by the American Journalism Review](#) (AJR) in 2011 found that at least twenty U.S. newspapers and other media outlets had eliminated all of their foreign bureaus since AJR first conducted a similar census in 1998.⁵² And even in traditional U.S. newsrooms that continue to maintain foreign bureaus around the world, the number and size have shrunk dramatically in recent years.

Among newspapers, the *Wall Street Journal* still has the largest international reporting division, with correspondents in forty-nine countries, followed by the *New York Times* with reporters in twenty countries. Wire services are much larger. The Associated Press maintains bureaus in [seventy-nine countries](#),⁵³ while Bloomberg has correspondents in [seventy-three countries](#).⁵⁴

In 2014 the *Washington Post* had twenty [foreign correspondents](#) in fifteen countries.⁵⁵ That's down from a time, fifteen years or so ago, when the paper kept twenty bureaus staffed across the globe. But the international staff is no longer limited to correspondents based in foreign bureaus. In the mid-2000s, as many newsrooms sought new ways to engage online audiences, the *Post* hired videojournalist Travis Fox for a new kind of Web-only foreign reporting—new at least for a traditional newspaper.

Fox [traveled around the world](#) producing long, feature-length pieces for the Web.⁵⁶ His stories were fully reported, beautifully shot videos. Such work is costly to sustain, though, and like many other print organizations experimenting with video, the *Post* determined the cost was not yielding the advertising or the online audience it had expected. After Fox's departure in December of 2010, wire services became the main source of video for foreign stories on the *Post*'s website, with some contributions from the paper's own correspondents in the field.

Enter the Blog

By 2012 online innovators at mainstream media were focused on blogs as a key to attracting new audiences looking for specialized material or faster dispatches on breaking news. The *Post* and other big newspaper websites were hosting dozens of blogs on a wide range of topics. In international affairs, some blogs focused on a single country (China, India) or a particular conflict (Iraq, Syria). At the *Post*, writers from the paper and its

sister publication, *Newsweek*, were paired to discuss world news and foreign affairs in a blog called *PostGlobal* that is no longer active.

The international blog that eventually became *WorldViews* began as an experiment in 2012. “We wanted to offer readers an opportunity to consume foreign news in a different way,” said Douglas Jehl, the paper’s foreign editor, “one intended to complement the remarkable work being delivered by our foreign correspondents around the new way.”

Post correspondents were encouraged to contribute to the new blog. But not many leaped at the idea. “I felt some skepticism about writing for the foreign blog at first,” said Kathy Lally, the *Post*’s former bureau chief in Moscow. “Not philosophical questions but practical ones: How much time it would require was the main question.”

Lally’s reaction has been a common one wherever mainstream media have informed staff reporters—including foreign correspondents—that their jobs now included writing for the Web. Unlike the daily paper, delivered just once in twenty-four hours, the Internet never sleeps. The push to move from a legacy schedule to a 24/7 one inevitably meets resistance. “The habits and traditions built over a century and a half of putting out the paper are a powerful, conservative force as we transition to digital,” noted a recent internal [*New York Times* report](#) on newsroom innovation.⁵⁷

That observation can apply equally to other legacy media, like at the *Post* where foreign correspondents’ reactions to the new blog in 2012 initially boiled down to this: “You’re asking us to do more work, for no additional pay.” (Correspondents get no compensation for blog contributions.) So, in its earliest days, the *Post*’s international blog depended on fairly sporadic field reports, supplemented by Web producers working in Washington. It was not the most auspicious start.

That changed with the hiring of Max Fisher, the blog’s first full-time staff writer, who arrived in September of 2012 just two months before the experimental blog was to officially launch as *WorldViews*. Fisher had never been a foreign correspondent and did not travel for his pieces, but he wrote daily about breaking news abroad. His sources included *Post* foreign correspondents (feeding information to Fisher was far less trouble than writing an additional story), as well as other news sites, social media, and video from public sources like YouTube.

Fisher developed a facility for synthesizing analysis from public data and previously reported stories—all while remaining in Washington. The result could be both serious and entertaining, like this piece [debunking widespread rumors that Kim Jong Un had fed his uncle to hungry dogs](#).⁵⁸ Although at times sensational, and occasionally controversial, Fisher probably became best known for explainer posts like “[40 maps that explain the world](#),”⁵⁹ which were drawing a tremendous number of readers to the blog, and thus, to the *Washington Post*. In 2013, the *Post* had over fifty blogs, and *WorldViews* ranked among the top five in page views. Fisher left the blog in 2014, but two full-time writers continue to staff it. “The conversational, explanatory tone that *WorldViews* employs has proven to be enormously appealing, by being timely, smart and fun, all at the same time,”

said foreign editor Jehl, who worked as a traditional correspondent for nineteen years, reporting from nearly forty countries. Jehl tells his correspondents that there is not much difference between what they've done traditionally and what the blog demands: short, small pieces told with a distinctive voice.

At the heart of the digital transition, though, is this essential factor in building a global audience: speed. In the past, a foreign correspondent typically faced one daily deadline. Today, the idea of having an entire day to report a breaking news story sounds luxurious, as then-Moscow correspondent Kathy Lally explained in an email interview in April of 2014. “The other day I covered Vladimir Putin’s annual televised, phone-in question-and-answer session with the Russian nation,” she wrote. “It went on for four hours. I filed a short story after the first hour and missed some things he was saying while I was writing and filing.”

Lally went on to write [the main story](#) that led the *Post*'s website and the next day's paper.⁶⁰ Meanwhile, at the blog, *WorldViews* published even more dispatches, covering both [the quirky](#)⁶¹ and [the newsy](#)⁶² items of the speech in close to real time. These were written by *WorldViews* bloggers in Washington with email feeds from Lally in Moscow. On a breaking news story, that kind of multiple filing, by both Lally and the bloggers, is essential to grab readers who want to know, right now, what's happening. The blog offers a platform to publish a story, even if it's still fragmented and developing.

When Israel launched airstrikes near Damascus last May, for example, [YouTube videos like this](#)⁶³ became a primary and immediate source for news. In the old newspaper model, the *Post* and other publications would have worked on a story about this attack for the next day's edition. But in the hybrid newspaper-digital model of today, the *Post*'s Beirut bureau [put together a story](#) that incorporated the YouTube video, which was already widely circulating on Twitter, added some reporting context and posted it within hours.⁶⁴

[Videos posted on the Internet by activists](#)⁶⁵ showed a huge fireball erupting on Mount Qassioun, a landmark hill overlooking the capital on which the Syrian government has deployed much of the firepower it is using against rebel-controlled areas surrounding the city.⁶⁶

The increased emphasis on speed evokes fears among traditional newsroom editors, who see the need to file and publish fast as a compromise to accuracy. It doesn't have to be. A successful news operation can do both: Post a few paragraphs of news based on what the reporter knows and then gradually add to it throughout the day. It's what wire services have done for decades—though today, in traditional print newsrooms, it's known as digital-first reporting.

Over time, the *Post*'s foreign correspondents have become more active contributors to *WorldViews*. Today almost every journalist in the paper's fifteen bureaus contributes ideas for posts to the bloggers in Washington. Or they may pass on stories or viral videos that are big news in the countries where they are reporting. Some embrace the opportunity the blog offers to tell stories in a more informal voice.

An example: an [entry on the Nairobi Mall attack](#) by the *Post*'s Sudarsan Raghavan.⁶⁷ Raghavan's stories describing wars and conflicts from Sana'a to Baghdad have appeared on the front pages of the *Washington Post* many times. But in this blog entry following the harrowing day in Nairobi, he wrote in first person, connecting with readers on a more personal level, while still describing the horror on the ground—a mission that a traditional article format doesn't provide.

Defining the Future

As a digital foreign editor for the *Washington Post*, one of my roles is to encourage and guide our foreign correspondents in the pivot toward digital-first journalism. Earlier this year, when Will Englund was covering the Maidan anti-government protests in Ukraine, we asked him to capture some video from the scene.

Englund is sixty-one and has a Pulitzer Prize for investigative reporting. He and Lally, his wife, shared the Moscow bureau job at the time, which included covering the unrest in Ukraine. Englund had done [video before from Nagorno Karabakh](#), a long-running conflict dating back to the Soviet era, but he was far from an experienced videographer.⁶⁸

In Kiev, he used a Canon point-and-shoot camera that the *Post* gives to all of its foreign correspondents. It helped, he said, that the Maidan protests were “always extremely photogenic.” He filed the audio recording of his narration separately, and the sound and images were put together by one of the dozens of video editors the *Post* has hired in recent years to boost its online video presence. [Englund’s video from Kiev](#) conveyed the Maidan scene in a way that words alone could not.⁶⁹

Lally and Englund, who now work as *Post* editors in Washington, both became important contributors to *WorldViews* while they worked overseas. Still, both miss the “good old days” of traditional newspaper foreign correspondence. “It can be satisfying to be quick with a story, but it’s not terribly rewarding,” said Englund. “And being enslaved by the Web hugely reduces our ability to explore and dig and do the other acts essential to quality journalism.”

Englund suggested that the *Post* leave more international breaking news coverage to wire service reports, giving the paper’s foreign correspondents time to explore deeper stories. “I believe the *Post* would be more valuable, and readable, if it moved away from hourly hard news, rather than trying to stay on top of it,” he said.

The debate on the shape of the mainstream foreign desk in the digital era is an ongoing one. Right now, the *Post* and other newsrooms are working with a hybrid blend of traditional correspondents and in-house bloggers, urging them to cooperate and complement each other’s work to create a fresh, constantly updated foreign report. But even with the increased U.S. and international audience drawn by *WorldViews*, it’s impossible to say whether this formula—or something not yet tried—will be the long-term foreign-desk model.

A recent move at the *New York Times* signaled a rethinking of the blog approach there. The paper has ended or merged more than half of its blogs this year, including two with an international focus: *India Ink* and *The Lede*. *India Ink* was less than three years old and relied on freelance contributions, as well as postings by the paper's correspondents in the country. *The Lede* often focused on breaking international stories. Those are now being covered in a new feature called [Open Source](#), written by Robert Mackey, who previously wrote *The Lede*.⁷⁰ Open Source is akin to a blog, though it is not identified [in the directory](#) as one,⁷¹ and Mackey's reporting for it draws on social media updates from Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube videos.

In an interview in June, [Times assistant managing editor Ian Fisher said](#), “We’re going to continue to provide bloggy content with a more conversational tone. We’re just not going to do [it] as much in standard reverse-chronological blogs.”⁷²

The *Times*' change may reflect a growing trend: that most digital readers find content through search and social, rather than by seeking out the homepage of dedicated platforms. Yet, even digitally native publications such as [Quartz](#)⁷³ and [Buzzfeed](#)⁷⁴ have launched features focused on India, and the *Wall Street Journal* continues to maintain several of its international blogs, including ones that report on [China](#)⁷⁵ and [India](#).⁷⁶

These blog experiments are reminders that much in the world of digital media remains just that: experimentation. They are also evidence of just how much international reporting has evolved—from an era only a few years ago when the emphasis was on rich, resource-intensive multimedia storytelling, to a time when newsrooms are struggling to find less costly ways of engaging a wider audience to meet their advertising goals.

The Digital Natives

The statistics on closings of traditional foreign bureaus are grim, but they do not tell the whole story of foreign news coverage. While mainstream bureaus have closed, digitally native sites like GlobalPost have filled some of the gap. GlobalPost was created in 2009 to cover international news for a largely U.S. audience, with sixty-five full-time or freelance correspondents filing regularly from around the world.

Over the past year or so, at least three other digital natives launched expansions into foreign news coverage: Huffington Post, BuzzFeed, and VICE, each of which has hired journalists whose role looks a lot like that of a traditional foreign correspondent.

Perhaps the most surprising of these newcomers is BuzzFeed, a site once known primarily for features such as “The 30 Most Important Cats of 2010.” BuzzFeed’s newly minted commitment to covering hard news from around the world has already made it a competitor, with in-depth international reporting from Caracas, Kiev, and other 2014 hot spots. With more than 160-million unique visitors, BuzzFeed is among the top ten most-visited news websites in the United States, though it’s not clear how many of those

visitors are reading the international dispatches. In mainstream newsrooms some have treated the site's foray into foreign reporting with a certain disdain.

Peter Preston, former longtime editor of *The Guardian*, is one skeptic. "There's nothing wrong with angles, twists, listicles," [he wrote in *The Guardian*](#). "If they encourage readers, that's great. If they make money, that's great too. But they are not salvation for battling reporters in the depths of Africa, doing stories that matter to them and their communities."⁷⁷

Preston's critique makes BuzzFeed's foreign desk sound almost as frivolous as its cat videos. It's not. When it announced it would cover foreign news, the site hired respected ex-*Guardian* Moscow correspondent Miriam Elder, who then recruited reporters to cover Egypt, Syria, Russia, Ukraine, and other current news centers. Following a [fresh fifty million-dollar investment in August](#), BuzzFeed has said it plans to open offices in Japan, Germany, Mexico, and India later this year.⁷⁸

All of this begins to sound like new media copying legacy media—at the same time that legacy foreign desks are trying to adapt to the new world of digital. "I'm not sure there is much difference—at the end of the day, the reporting we do is a lot more traditional than I think a lot of people would expect," Miriam Elder told me. "It's about making and meeting sources, making phone calls, finding the news, breaking the news."

There are fundamental differences, of course. BuzzFeed began life as a purveyor of viral entertainment, and fluff and sensation still dominate its homepage (you're far more likely to access its international reporting from your social feeds). But as a digital native, BuzzFeed definitely has an edge in solving the biggest conundrum in the new world of journalism: How do you attract an audience?

Social-friendly headlines are one key to audience engagement. The *Post* and other mainstream newsrooms are still catching up to BuzzFeed, Upworthy, and other digital natives that know how to maximize clicks and shares with head-turning headlines. The *Post* now shares detailed visual [presentations](#) with national and international correspondents,⁷⁹ to show how lead-ins that [read like social headlines](#) can grab attention.⁸⁰ ("Headlines are the new nut grafs" is a line we hear frequently at digital workshop sessions for our reporters.)

Also key to answering how to attract an audience is the need to rethink the traditional U.S. newspaper definition of audience. With few exceptions, papers were local institutions, serving the community where they published. The Internet lets us reach well beyond traditional print circulation areas, but it doesn't tell us how best to do that. "If we are going to continue to expand our readership, as we must do in a digital world, growing those national and international audience will be crucial to our success," said Jehl, the *Post*'s foreign editor.

Again, digital natives like BuzzFeed may have, at least, a psychological advantage in their instinctively conscious understanding that audiences are now global. That's led

BuzzFeed to a new approach in assigning beats. Globalization and the Internet mean that “someone who lives in an urban center in Russia or Uruguay or Vietnam can have more in common with each other than with other people in their own countries,” said Elder. So instead of making all foreign beats based on geography, Elder has created some “thematic beats,” like international women’s rights. Women’s correspondent Jina Moore literally travels the world to write about how [women became players](#) in Rwanda’s politics,⁸¹ about Brazil’s decision to [pay reparations for maternal death](#),⁸² and about [abuse in Iraqi prisons](#).⁸³

The thematic approach is key to engaging a broad global audience, said BuzzFeed deputy foreign editor Paul Hamilos, in [an interview with Journalism.co.uk](#). “You’re not going to grow a news organization if you only think of your English language readers in your home country,” he said.⁸⁴

In the “good old days,” mainstream outlets like the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* set the agenda for foreign news in the United States. In the digital era, their authority as agenda setters is shared with others, and some of the digital natives may end up showing them important new paradigms for foreign reporting.

The newcomers still have a lot to prove, though. Their commitment to news, unlike that of mainstream media, is a new phenomenon. Will they still be in the foreign news business a decade from now? It’s hard to say—just as it’s impossible to predict the shape of the traditional newsroom’s foreign desk ten years down the road.

David Versus Goliath: Digital Resources for Expanded Reporting—and Censoring

By Burcu Baykurt

At the height of the 2013 anti-government protests in Istanbul’s Gezi Park, most of Turkey’s controlled, mainstream media committed mass self-censorship. None drew more derision for timidity than CNN Turk, which became the target of sardonic jokes for its decision to air a documentary on penguins at the height of the domestic crisis.

Anyone with an Internet connection and the desire to know what was really going on, though, could easily switch to one domestic news source for independent reporting: [140journos](#), a counter-media startup that operated in relative obscurity for a year and a half before the protests began.

Before Gezi, 140journos founders Engin Önder, Cem Aydoğdu, Oğulcan Ekiz, and Safa Soydan set out to bridge the wide information gap between those who witness news events in Turkey and those who produce mainstream journalism there. They composed journalistic news reports and sent out one hundred forty-character tweets about events that mainstream media largely ignored: protests by leftist, conservative, or LGBTQ groups; and reports from courtrooms where credentialed journalists were not granted entrance. “We are not journalists and we don’t have a large network yet to say we represent citizens,” Önder told me when I first met him in 2012 in the news service’s shabby basement office, housed inside a four-hundred-year-old Istanbul building.

Then the Gezi protests began. In the information vacuum left by mainstream media, Önder and his colleagues gained a loyal following by showing their ability to sift through thousands of tweets around the clock, curate and verify social media content, bury unfounded rumors, and publish what turned out to be reliable accounts from the protests. With a reputation for veracity and an impressive list of new followers post-Gezi, Önder acknowledged with a smile, “We are all journalists now.”

The triumph of 140journos over media repression in Turkey may seem like a captivating David and Goliath tale—a narrative we’ve seen elsewhere where social media has sometimes circumvented power to deliver vital independent reporting to audiences in China, Iran, and other authoritarian regimes. But as in China, Iran, and elsewhere, the victory for digital journalism in Turkey has turned out to be severely limited.

During the Gezi Park demonstrations, Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan declared social media “[the worst menace to society](#).⁸⁵” State controls and surveillance, which have effectively cowed Turkey’s traditional media for years, soon shifted focus from newspapers and television to social media and other online information sources. In February of 2014, for example, the Turkish government [tightened its grip on the Internet](#) by requiring service providers to retain user information for up to two years and hand it over to regulators on demand.⁸⁶ A month later, [Twitter was banned](#)⁸⁷ for a two-week span shortly after Erdogan announced in a rally that he would [wipe out social media](#) without regard for what the international community had to say about it.⁸⁸

Examples abound of repressive states manipulating new technologies to curb independent speech in the digital sphere, from [Libya's shutdown of the Internet](#)⁸⁹ during widespread protests in 2011 to Twitter's charge that the [Venezuelan government blocked](#) images on the service during 2014's unrest there.⁹⁰ Even more democratic-based governments have contemplated restrictions on digital communications in moments of crisis—as British Prime Minister David Cameron [considered banning suspects](#) from social media during the 2011 riots in the United Kingdom.⁹¹

Government shutdowns and blockages cut the flow of information to domestic audiences, to foreign correspondents covering major international stories, and to global audiences accessing news about breaking events directly from social media. They are a clear threat to Internet freedom. Even when governments do not explicitly interfere with online content, they can stifle free expression with policies that [keep an eye on metadata](#).⁹² In collecting information about where, when, and with whom people communicate, metadata—which includes every detail except the content—can reveal a lot, thereby posing a serious potential threat to source confidentiality. The United States, for example, justifies its controversial surveillance programs as a security tool, not a weapon for censorship. But the potential for misuse of surveillance can have a chilling effect on journalism, as documented in a 2014 report by Human Rights Watch and the American Civil Liberties Union that concluded, [“Government spying undermines media freedom.”](#)⁹³

Beyond overt government censorship and surveillance programs, a third concern for journalists are Internet governance policies that allow governments to pressure service providers and services, such as Twitter and Facebook, to block reporting posted on their platforms. Such actions can turn private companies into Internet censors on behalf of the government.

If the Internet is an effective tool for resistance, it is increasingly clear that it is also an effective tool for restriction and surveillance. As sociologist [Zeynep Tufekci said](#), “The design of today’s digital tools makes the two inseparable.”⁹⁴

Digital Repression and Censorship

When the Internet first became commercially available in the 1990s, its users faced very few restrictions. In a world where, as media critic A.J. Liebling put it, “Freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one,” suddenly millions could own the means of transmitting information and ideas to a mass audience. The Internet, a decentralized platform, offered a level playing field for pesky bloggers, freelance journalists, or activists to reach audiences around the world without seeking the institutional approvals of governments or big media companies.

Two decades later, however, almost every government in the world regulates or restricts online communications [in varying degrees](#).⁹⁵ As more governments have begun to use those regulatory powers to monitor, censor, or shut down digital communications, the notion of the Internet as a freewheeling forum immune to repression has dimmed.

At a relatively low level of harassment, governments are simply using new digital platforms to apply some of their traditional tactics—delivering intimidating messages by email, for example, instead of by phone. Now, though, a threatening message can be sent at once, en masse. Such was the case when journalists, activists, and others present at anti-government demonstrations in Kiev in early 2014 received this mobile text: “[Dear subscriber, you are registered as a participant in a mass disturbance.](#)”⁹⁶

Digital technology can also add new dimensions to smear campaigns, an effort attributed to Iranian authorities that [created fake blogs](#) to discredit Iranian journalists living in exile in early 2013.⁹⁷ The smear might also include a call to digital action, as happened in Turkey when an official attacked journalist Selin Girit, who works for the BBC, after she [tweeted a comment from a Gezi protester](#) calling for an economic boycott for six months.⁹⁸ Ankara’s pro-government mayor attributed the quote to Girit herself in Twitter posts, calling her a British agent and urging his more than 700,000 followers to spam Girit’s account. Many apparently responded; the reporter said her work during the busiest days of the Gezi protests was severely compromised by spam attackers.

Then there are more formal strategies for repression, like new laws or decrees put in place by governments seeking to constrain online communications. Some of these censorship efforts are obvious and blunt: Turkey, for example, has at different times blocked access to Twitter and YouTube. Iran, China, and North Korea have [blocked Twitter on and off](#),⁹⁹ and Google reported that its products and services, including YouTube, have been [disrupted](#) around the world more than one-hundred times since 2009.¹⁰⁰

Another form of online harassment, of concern to both individual journalists and news organizations, is the distributed denial of services (DDoS) attack. Essentially, this involves overloading a website with traffic—usually generated by bots—so that it cannot be accessed for some period of time. According to the national security documents leaked by Edward Snowden in 2013, the British intelligence agency [shut down](#) Internet chat rooms used by activists associated with Anonymous by mounting a DDoS attack.¹⁰¹ The case marked “[the first Western government](#)” known to have engaged in this particular form of restriction, according to NBC News.¹⁰²

The Anonymous revelation was unusual; in most cases it is almost impossible to confirm when or whether a government has employed DDoS as a way to shut down websites. More typical was a case involving Ustream.tv, a popular website that allows protesters from around the globe to stream video from their phones. In 2012, the site’s system came [under a large DDoS attack](#) designed to target a Russian who had used Ustream.tv to broadcast information about Moscow protests against President Vladimir Putin.¹⁰³ Although Brad Hunstable, cofounder and CEO of Ustream, publicly protested the attack, [he could not connect it with a particular government or organization.](#)¹⁰⁴

Surveillance

Edward Snowden's 2013 leaks revealed that anyone, including journalists and their sources, may now be a target of government surveillance. While the U.S. government says its surveillance is aimed at national security, not journalists, that doesn't protect reporters from risk, according to Geoffrey King, Internet advocacy coordinator for the Committee to Protect Journalists. "By keeping a record of all communications transactions swept up in its dragnet, and then linking those transactions to content, the U.S. government could recreate a reporter's research, retrace a source's movements, and even retroactively listen in on communications that would otherwise have evaporated forever," said King.

It seems that even the fear of exposure is enough to affect potential sources' willingness to go on the record, added Trevor Timm of the Freedom of the Press Foundation, a nonprofit group that promotes transparency and digital security in journalism. "When sources know that their information is tracked and stored in a database, it makes them think twice before ever talking to a journalist," said Timm. This impacts investigative reporting perhaps the most, he said. Even when sources request anonymity to avoid repercussions for leaking documents or other critical material, they're unconvinced the journalist can provide it.

New Risks—Nongovernment Actors

The Committee to Protect Journalists cited digital censorship and surveillance by governments as two examples of "[the profound erosion of freedom on the Internet](#)" when it placed "cyberspace" on its 2013 "CPJ Risk List."¹⁰⁵ The list normally highlights countries where press freedom is on the decline; by adding cyberspace to the list, the committee sought to highlight new threats that transcend country boundaries.

As documented by CPJ, the risks go beyond government interference. Tech-savvy protest collectives, usually referred to as hacktivists, have been known to launch cyberattacks targeting the online presence of big news organizations, such as [Reuters](#),¹⁰⁶ [the Washington Post](#),¹⁰⁷ and [the Financial Times](#).¹⁰⁸ Such collectives also track, and sometimes hack, individual reporters. [Vietnamese activist Ngoc Thu](#), who runs a popular dissident blog from California where she resides, became the target of a pro-government cyber collective last year.¹⁰⁹ After invading her blog and personal email, the hackers posted her photos on the blog, along with defamatory messages. It took Thu a week to regain control and move her blog to a new address.

Increasing Corporate Regulation

From [tweaking their algorithms](#)¹¹⁰ to documenting [global government requests](#)¹¹¹ or [building surveillance tools](#),¹¹² many private companies—directly or indirectly—restrict, control, and direct how news is accessed and shared. Yet, as the Electronic Frontier Foundation's (EFF) director for International Freedom of Expression [Jillian C. York pointed out](#), few people are thinking deeply about the implications that corporate actions have for free speech.¹¹³

These actions may come in response to government demands, just as they did last year when [Britain](#) announced it would require Internet service providers (ISPs) to block sites the government deems “terrorist” or otherwise dangerous.¹¹⁴ In many countries, including [the United States](#), ISPs are sometimes legally required to collect user data in bulk.¹¹⁵ The ISPs—mostly telephone and cable companies—say they have no choice but to comply when state agencies demand user information because their business licenses are subject to approval by those same agencies.

There are some efforts afoot to increase transparency about government demands. Vodafone, the world’s second biggest mobile phone company, recently published its first [Law Enforcement Disclosure Report](#) to document the extent of government demands in the twenty-nine countries where it operates.¹¹⁶ While most governments need legal notices or warrants to tap into customers’ mobile communications, Vodafone said there are six countries where “the law dictates that specific agencies and authorities must have direct access to an operator’s network.”¹¹⁷ The report did not name the countries, but said that, “If we do not comply with a lawful demand for assistance, governments can remove our license to operate.”¹¹⁸

Content providers can face similar pressures. Some of them, like [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#), try to present images of themselves as free speech advocates. But in an area with little transparency, some of these companies may be taking actions—in response to government demands—that actually restrict free speech and independent reporting. One of the most notorious examples is the 2004 case of Chinese journalist [Shi Tao](#), who was sentenced to ten years in prison on charges of revealing state secrets after Yahoo complied with a Chinese government request to turn over Shi Tao’s account information and email content.¹¹⁹ His email message, which he sent to a U.S.-based website, related a government mandate to Chinese media organizations to “downplay” the upcoming anniversary of the Tiananmen Square uprising. Shi Tao was released in 2013 after serving eight years of his sentence.

Rebecca MacKinnon, who closely covered the Shi Tao case and now directs the [Ranking Digital Rights](#)¹²⁰ project at the New America Foundation, said companies should take steps to minimize their complicity in censorship. Still, she acknowledged in a [Guernica feature she wrote](#), “If a company were to make a blanket commitment to never comply with any government censorship or surveillance requests, it would be able to do business precisely nowhere.”¹²¹ That being said, EFF’s Jillian C. York argued that, in their haste to comply, companies sometimes go beyond what is legally required in a government request. “[Facebook](#) hands over data to the Pakistani government even though it has no offices there and there is no mutual legal assistance treaty between the U.S and Pakistan,” she said.¹²² Another example York cited was Twitter’s decision this year to remove “blasphemous” tweets in [Pakistan](#).¹²³ While the tweets were later restored, she noted that Twitter did not have to comply in the first place.

There are some efforts by ISPs and content providers to [counter](#) government requests,¹²⁴ using [coalitions](#)¹²⁵ aimed at reporting instances of [online censorship](#),¹²⁶ [assessing the openness of the Internet](#),¹²⁷ and [ranking tech companies](#) on their free speech and privacy

practices.¹²⁸ Yet many negotiations between governments and companies take place behind closed doors. In Turkey, for example, soon after Twitter was temporarily banned in early 2014, Colin Crowell, the company’s head of policy, [met with government officials in Ankara](#).¹²⁹ The details of those meetings were never made public. A week after the visit, Twitter blocked two accounts that had written about [corruption allegations](#) involving Prime Minister Erdogan, his family, and associates.¹³⁰

There are no enforceable global guidelines for protecting independent online reporting or at least forcing more transparency about government demands. Informally, though, one effort to mitigate these problems involves content providers sending government requests they receive to the [Chilling Effects Project](#), which creates an archive of legal notices.¹³¹ Through the website, users can track what kind of content governments seek to censor. It does not, however, reveal actions the private companies take on their own.

In early 2014, *The Atlantic* [reported](#) that dozens of Syrian opposition websites were shut down for posting what Facebook deemed to be graphic imagery or calls to violence that violated its service terms.¹³² As the company does not make public its reasons for such decisions, activists remain unclear about where Facebook draws the line between news and events that incite violence. In another case, the Facebook page of an alternative news outlet in Turkey, Ötekilerin Postası (The Others’ Post), was shut down several times last year. Facebook said the action was triggered by a large number of user complaints. The company did not explain any further beyond saying the page had violated Facebook’s community standards. “What Facebook is doing is censorship: blatantly taking sides and engaging in digital vandalism,” [said Ötekilerin Postası](#), whose editors were banned from posting to the page for thirty days.¹³³

In owning the platforms that many people use for news-sharing, debate, and activism, companies like Google and Facebook are at the helm of deciding who can say what—and who gets heard. As [the big sources of traffic to digital content](#), these companies filter online news not based on the public value of a message, but on the potential increase in user engagement and advertising revenue.¹³⁴ They constantly change their algorithms, which vary country by country; the content that users see on their timelines or as search results depends on thousands of variables. How the companies [manage those algorithms](#) is not transparent, despite the significant impact they have on how we disperse and read online news.¹³⁵

In other words, for those who produce and share news reports online, there is a lot to be done in “an information environment where the content is ours but the selection is theirs,” noted communications scholar [Tarleton Gillespie](#).¹³⁶

Fighting Back—Or, Protecting Yourself?

Edward Snowden’s revelations about widespread surveillance underscored that digital security is now a press freedom issue. As *The Guardian*’s Alan Rusbridger put it, “[It’s essential to be paranoid](#)” about cyber security in the post-Snowden era.¹³⁷ But being

worried isn't enough. A more robust digital security toolbox and a series of behavioral changes are imperative on both individual and institutional levels.

Most technology experts agree that designing effective precautions demands that journalists first define the potential threats they face. Only then can they seek tools to keep their reporting secure. Unless there are technologists available in the newsroom, however, journalists are often on their own to recognize the possible digital security risks. Leaving it to individuals could mean that little gets done to increase security. "There's still hesitancy among many journalists to go through security training and implement it," said Jennifer Henrichsen, an independent researcher who conducted an electronic survey on the safety of online journalists for the United Nations Organization for Education, Science, and Culture (UNESCO). Even for technologically literate journalists, it is usually extremely difficult and time consuming to take even the basic security precautions, she said. And, "Many journalists may not perceive a direct harm to themselves or their sources."

For those who do pursue security training, there are many online tools, such as encryption software, that are easily accessible and often available at no charge. Susan E. McGregor, assistant director of the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University, [described encryption](#) as "the process of scrambling and encoding messages" so that only someone with the correct key can unlock the original.¹³⁸ As leaving no traces online becomes a wider concern for anyone who reports journalistically in the age of mass surveillance, [secure chat software](#)¹³⁹ and [Tor for anonymous browsing](#)¹⁴⁰ should become more commonplace in interviewing and research.

The bad news is, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to security so keeping a journalist's work secure can't be done with the flip of a switch. Within big news organizations there is a constant search for ways to build more security into internal communications networks. The Freedom of the Press Foundation—a San Francisco-based group whose board includes Edward Snowden, Daniel Ellsberg, and journalists Glenn Greenwald and Laura Poitras—promotes tools for news outlets to evade surveillance by governments. The [SecureDrop](#)¹⁴¹—an open-source whistleblowing platform to submit anonymous leaks—is one of them, now used by publications such as *The Guardian*, the *Washington Post*, and ProPublica.

It is not only a crackable password or connecting to insecure networks that can put journalists and their sources at risk, though. Some intelligence agencies, including the NSA and Britain's GCHQ, reportedly undermine encryption standards of networks [through bribery, cajoling, and legal processes](#).¹⁴² Pointing to the overall danger that acts like these inject into the whole network, CPJ's Geoffrey King said, "We should be fixing things, patching holes rather than just letting those vulnerabilities secretly get worse."

Moving Forward

When the Turkish government blocked access to Twitter in March of 2014, it took only a couple of minutes for most users to circumvent the ban. In fact, in the first twelve hours

after the blockage began, there was [a thirty-three percent increase](#) in the number of Twitter messages from Turkey and a seventeen percent increase in the number of unique users.¹⁴³ During the two-week ban, 140journos continued receiving and distributing citizen reports at a furious pace.

In response, the government [ramped up](#) its censorship by blocking Google DNS and adding YouTube to its list of verboten social media sites.¹⁴⁴ Despite court orders, [the ban on YouTube had still not been lifted](#) as of early April.¹⁴⁵ It wasn't until late May that the Constitutional Court of Turkey, the country's uppermost legal body, ruled in favor of free speech and ended the block.¹⁴⁶

The online battle in Turkey reflects a global struggle, in which journalists—traditional or digital—are constantly engineering new ways to work around repressive tactics, while governments continue honing their efforts to neutralize, censor, and suppress. These push-and-pull battles affect not only journalists, but also their sources and audiences around the globe who seek independent, uncensored reporting in an increasingly digitized world.

A Professional Kinship? Blurring the Lines Between International Journalism and Advocacy

By Jessie Graham

While Madeleine Bair was a journalism student at the University of California, Berkeley a few years ago, she landed a coveted summer internship in the Colombia bureau of an international news agency. Bair imagined that the bureau staff would be in the field constantly, reporting on dramatic events like the kidnappings and murders of labor activists and indigenous leaders in rural Colombia. But because of resource constraints and security concerns, agency staff weren't able to travel to many regions where big news was happening.

So instead of learning the ropes of serious field correspondence, she was “stuck in an office, reporting on Shakira,” Bair said. While there, she read *More Terrible Than Death*, a 2003 account of the violent fallout of the U.S. war on drugs in Colombia. The book is based on the kind of serious, analytical reporting that Bair wanted to do. But its author, Robin Kirk, was a former Human Rights Watch researcher—not a journalist.

Bair returned to Berkeley with an understanding that the career she hoped for was not necessarily going to take place at a traditional news organization. When she graduated with her journalism degree in 2011, she took her skills to an advocacy group in Jamaica, which hired her to produce a series of videos about extrajudicial killings. Later she landed a fellowship at Human Rights Watch, where she worked on a video about government involvement in disappearances in Mexico’s drug war. (I was her supervisor.)

Today, Bair works for WITNESS, an international nongovernmental organization that trains and equips people to use video in their fight for human rights. As curator of the group’s [human rights channel](#) on YouTube, she focuses on collecting, verifying, and analyzing citizen-generated content from around the world.¹⁴⁷

Though WITNESS is an advocacy group, not a news outlet, when Bair filed her 2013 tax return, she wrote “journalist” under occupation. “Wherever I’ve worked, I’ve always maintained the same integrity or set of standards that I used when reporting for newspapers or public radio and the skills that I honed in journalism school,” she said. “Advocacy journalism has an objective, but that doesn’t mean it’s lesser than some idea of ‘pure’ journalism.”

Whatever you choose to call Bair—journalist or advocate—her career trajectory shows how the idealized boundaries between international reporting and advocacy have blurred over the past decade in the United States. Advocacy groups that once depended on mainstream media to report the findings of their work can now produce and distribute reports directly to global audiences. And some media outlets that once drew a clear line between the work of journalists and the work of advocacy groups are now increasingly using videos, photos, and other materials from local activists or researchers at global groups like Human Rights Watch, where I work.

Digital developments are at the heart of this change: specifically, the Internet's disruption of traditional economic models in the news business (read: news outlets have slashed funding for foreign reporting) and the explosion of easy-to-use digital devices now widely available to advocates, activists, and ordinary citizens all over the globe.

In this environment, new kinds of storytellers are inventing themselves. Many use the same rigorous, fact-based reporting techniques of American journalism, but they're also using their reporting to actively draw conclusions and lobby for change in ways that traditional journalism in the United States has long shunned.

The change may be most obvious in photography, where a photographer like Marcus Bleasdale has specialized in documenting one of the main concerns of rights groups: the human cost of conflict. Bleasdale's images have appeared in *National Geographic*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and *Newsweek*, to name a few. But his primary client and partner over the past few years has been Human Rights Watch.

Wherever he works, Bleasdale said, his methods are classic photojournalism. But he doesn't call himself a journalist. "There's absolutely no difference in how I operate if I work for Human Rights Watch, *National Geographic*, or the *New York Times*," Bleasdale told me. The disparity lies in how those organizations use the images he makes, and he strongly prefers working with groups that use his photographs and videos to advocate for change. "I started out wanting to be a photographer that focused on human rights," he said. "And now I'm a human rights activist that uses photography." Once he's made an image, Bleasdale said, his next question is, "Who can you put that photo in front of to make a change?"

Nonprofit News

Nonprofit news used to mean The Associated Press and NPR. Both are clearly news organizations, but they don't rely on advertisers for funding. Today, we're seeing a new crop of digitally native journalism sites funded by philanthropy and operating as nonprofits. Some are simply using a new funding source to produce traditional journalism. Others are using foundation funding to produce or bankroll reporting with a strong point of view, often focused on a specific premise—like the Marshall Project's assertion that the U.S. justice system is broken and needs fixing or FirstLook's commitment to exposing violations of privacy and civil liberties carried out in the name of national security. It's a digital expression of an old-fashioned, muckraking tradition and "a huge change for the better for people who want to go deeper," said Dan Gillmor, director of the Knight Center for Digital Media Entrepreneurship at Arizona State University.

Paralleling the creation of some point-of-view news enterprises is the growth of communications efforts by advocacy organizations, such as Human Rights Watch, where I have worked since 2008. As traditional newsrooms have closed or reduced their foreign news operations, many of their journalists have moved to fulltime jobs with advocacy

groups tackling international issues. These are the same groups that once depended on mainstream media to get their research out to a wide audience. They still pursue coverage in local newspapers and radio, on cable news shows, or placement of a timely op-ed in the *Washington Post*. But their in-house communications departments are now likely to have staff capable of producing their own multimedia packages, which may reach audiences first via the organization's own website or through YouTube.

In the week before the start of the 2014 Sochi Olympics, for example, Human Rights Watch released [a video](#) about Russian vigilante groups attacking gay men.¹⁴⁸ [News outlets picked up the story](#), and Reddit and Buzzworthy helped the video reach three and a half-million views in a little over two weeks.¹⁴⁹

Some of the communications staff at Human Rights Watch who work on stories like these are veterans of the news and documentary world. So are some of the researchers in the field, like Letta Tayler, senior researcher for terrorism/counterterrorism at Human Rights Watch and a former foreign correspondent for *Newsday*.

As a journalist, Tayler covered the U.S. invasion of Iraq, prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib, and detainees at Guantanamo Bay, among other post-9/11 stories. Her focus at Human Rights Watch is on human rights abuses perpetrated in the name of counterterrorism. She researches and writes detailed, heavily documented reports like "[Unpunished Massacre: Yemen's Failed Response to the 'Friday of Dignity' Killings](#)," which calls for, among other actions, international sanctions on Yemeni officials deemed responsible for the killings of anti-government protestors during the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings.¹⁵⁰ The same research is often the basis for shorter pieces, without the calls to action, which Tayler writes for *Salon*, *Foreign Policy*, GlobalPost, and others.

"We're becoming a little more like journalists, and journalists are becoming a bit more like us," said Emma Daly, a former foreign correspondent for the *New York Times* who is now communications director at Human Rights Watch. "We try to use journalistic techniques. Journalists use nonprofits for funding, and even for specialized reporting."

The Advocacy Newsroom

Before I came to Human Rights Watch I reported for public radio and other news organizations for more than a decade, funding some of my international reporting with grants from nonprofit fellowship programs. I was devoted to journalism and didn't imagine I'd ever defect to an advocacy group—until foreign reporting budgets began to shrink and new jobs like my current one (senior multimedia producer) began to appear at established nonprofits.

I don't call the work we do at Human Rights Watch journalism, though our workplace can sometimes feel like a newsroom. The focus is much narrower than at a mainstream news organization; it's exclusively on human rights issues. And while we often pursue the same stories that mainstream journalists are covering (see the recent [New York Times](#)¹⁵¹ and [Human Rights Watch](#)¹⁵² coverage of mass killings in Tikrit, Iraq), our

criteria for deploying resources gives added weight to working where we can bring about the most change. That leads to a different emphasis—our reports stress the abuses, abusers, and international standards more than most journalists would in their stories.

But if you see a Human Rights Watch researcher doing interviews in the field, it won't look much different from a foreign correspondent on the job—assuming that correspondent is reporting on human rights issues and has the time and inclination to speak with scores of witnesses and survivors. Researchers check these accounts against other sources—activists, local journalists, country experts, and government officials. Human Rights Watch increasingly seeks comment from those accused of abuses, just as journalists do.

When our research is complete, our report is written and our lawyers vet it for consistency with international law, as well as libel and fairness concerns; our work does not end with publication. We always issue a clear call for change, usually in the form of detailed recommendations to governments and international institutions. The Human Rights Watch website describes the goal like this: “We work to increase the price of human rights abuse. The more tyrants we bring to justice, the more potential abusers will reconsider committing human rights violations.”

With emergency situations happening in places now covered by few foreign correspondents, we and other advocacy groups often serve as a kind of niche wire service for breaking news. As fighting erupted in the Central African Republic in 2013, for example, Human Rights Watch's [Peter Bouckaert](#)¹⁵³ and Bleasdale, the photographer, were among the few foreigners reporting on a sustained basis from the ground. Their work for Human Rights Watch ran on CNN and ABC, and on the *Foreign Policy* and *National Geographic* websites. Similarly, the breaking news blog at the *New York Times* website used [tweets from Amnesty International's Joanne Mariner](#), including a photo of a Muslim boy in the Central African Republic who had suffered a machete attack at the hands of the Christian militia.¹⁵⁴

“Five years ago NGOs were just starting to experiment with the idea that they were media providers,” said Ethan Zuckerman, director of the Center for Civic Media at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Now, in the age of digital technology and 24/7 news and information, said Zuckerman, “they understand they have to be.”

Amnesty International, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and the International Rescue Committee have created portals that make their content available for journalists to download upon registering with the site. Human Rights Watch has a similar system that's led to increased pickup from mainstream broadcasters—even by major outlets that first balked at the idea of using an advocacy group's raw footage and produced pieces. Among those who now run Human Rights Watch video on air and online are [CNN](#),¹⁵⁵ the [BBC](#),¹⁵⁶ and [Al Jazeera America](#).¹⁵⁷ Human Rights Watch has partnerships with BuzzFeed and the European Broadcasting Union, which often distributes the group's raw footage to news outlets worldwide. Our videos are not advertisements for the organization; they include documentary evidence, such as

interviews that Human Rights Watch researchers have done with survivors of human rights abuses, satellite images, maps, and primary documents. Some media organizations, on principle, decline video or other material produced by advocacy groups. Even so, within mainstream newsrooms newer departments—like blogs that curate and aggregate from many sources—may have greater leeway in using material like ours.

Robert Mackey, a [digital columnist](#) for the *New York Times* Foreign desk,¹⁵⁸ said he usually deletes email news releases from advocacy groups. But when a story is breaking far away, he often posts video or tweets from people working on the ground for Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Doctors Without Borders, or local groups like the activist Egyptian filmmakers at [Mosireen](#).¹⁵⁹ “It does seem clear that you guys are doing the work of journalists in a lot of cases,” Mackey told me. “It doesn’t matter whether the person doing the work has a point of view, but whether the work is rigorous and factual.”

Paying the Bills

In recent years, Human Rights Watch has started to make raw footage and produced pieces available with many of our reports. We train researchers to gather multimedia in the field and pair them with photojournalists who can help them find visual evidence and tell visual stories.

Journalists, particularly freelance photographers, who want to report on under-covered international stories say that because of budget cuts at traditional media outlets they are now often able to travel only thanks to paid assignments from advocacy or aid groups, or from grant-giving organizations like the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting. In 2010, for example, the [Pulitzer Center and Human Rights Watch teamed up](#) to send Bleasdale to follow the trail of the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) in Congo, the Central African Republic, Sudan, and Uganda.¹⁶⁰ The videos they produced had a strong advocacy slant. In one, [victims of the LRA appealed](#) to President Obama to act on commitments to help neutralize the rebel group.¹⁶¹ The video won two Webby Awards, an excerpt was broadcast on the *PBS NewsHour*, and Bleasdale’s still photos from the same assignment were published in [The Telegraph](#),¹⁶² *Le Monde*, *Newsweek*, and *Stern*.

The Pulitzer Center and Human Rights Watch also hosted an event with Bleasdale to help draw attention to the story. Jon Sawyer, the Pulitzer Center’s director and a former foreign correspondent, said he is comfortable with such collaborations. “I think that every journalism project worth its salt is advocating something, is trying to persuade you of something,” Sawyer said. “Otherwise, why go out and spend the time and the effort to master a subject and go out and interview people?”

These partnerships have become economically vital for photographers from agencies like VII and Magnum, many of whom have been taking assignments from aid and advocacy groups for more than a decade. Last November, for example, the photojournalist Ed Kashi produced [a video](#) about Syrian refugee youth that was published on [Time’s website](#).¹⁶³ The magazine’s fee was tiny, though, Kashi said. His travel expenses to the Syrian refugee camps were paid by the [International Medical Corps](#), which was working

in the camps.¹⁶⁴ “There’s less commissioning, not just less money but also less desire on the part of magazines for this sort of in-depth, visual storytelling,” said Kashi, who has done similar reporting stints with funding from Open Society Foundations and Oxfam. He is [currently working on a project with Human Rights Watch](#).¹⁶⁵ “The NGOs and foundations and nonprofits of the world are really stepping up to pay for, as well as facilitate, the fieldwork.”

The relationship is symbiotic. Advocacy groups need photos and videos to help them tell their stories. Journalists want to tell important stories about global issues. The photographers and videographers who enter into such deals say they usually can strike an agreement that allows them to retain copyrights for their work. So the group funds the trip and gets the material it needs, and the journalist is then free to sell his or her material to news outlets.

Kashi, who came of age when magazines had ample money to commission regular foreign reporting, said he never imagined he’d be using advocacy and aid groups as a primary source of funding. He’s still nostalgic for the days when magazines had money to send him off to cover the world, with few limitations.

But he also said he is comfortable taking assignments from groups like [La Isla Foundation](#), an organization whose sole focus is on ending an epidemic of a rare kidney disease among sugar cane workers in Latin America.¹⁶⁶ He’s especially proud of a series he did on the lingering effects of Agent Orange in Vietnam. That project, funded by the Ford Foundation, won photo prizes, but more important to Kashi was this result: The U.S. Congress committed four million dollars to help clean up Agent Orange in Vietnam. “To me that is so much more interesting and powerful than, ‘Hey, look, I got the cover of *National Geographic* with this picture, but nothing happened,’ ” Kashi said.

Strings Attached?

Other journalists told me they want to keep a clear distance from advocacy groups and funders. Rebecca Hamilton, a human rights lawyer who is a former Reuters correspondent and the author of *Fighting for Darfur*, covered South Sudan for the *Washington Post* from 2010–2011 thanks to a Pulitzer Center grant. The center is run by journalists, but Hamilton worried that the grant’s funder, [Humanity United](#)¹⁶⁷—which is run by Ebay’s Pierre Omidyar and his wife—would try to influence her reporting.

That didn’t happen, said Hamilton, who credits Sawyer, the Pulitzer Center director, with maintaining a clear firewall that prevents funders from dictating the direction the reporting takes. “That would be a mess,” said Sawyer, “if you had an advocacy organization that was trying to channel its own point of view through the journalist.”

Hamilton said she’s never worked directly for an advocacy group and she wants to keep it that way, though she sees overlaps between her work and that of human rights researchers. “I think you can make that transition once,” she said. “Going back and forth is difficult.”

But editors at many news outlets—especially those with limited budgets for foreign reporting—are increasingly open to working with journalists who have received specialized grants for reporting, or who travel on assignment for advocacy groups or UN agencies. “There just isn’t enough money to pay for the journalism that we want to do,” said Jennifer Goren, assignment editor at the BBC/PRI radio show *The World*.

Goren does not see a freelancer’s experience with advocacy groups as an automatic liability. Still, she remains on the lookout for potential conflicts of interest. If a reporter heads to Africa with money from the Carter Center, for example, *The World* will not accept a story about a Carter Center program. But a piece on an unrelated topic would likely pass muster.

Perhaps the best example I’ve found of the growing overlap between advocacy work and journalism is that of the veteran foreign correspondent [Janine di Giovanni](#), Middle East Editor at *Newsweek*, who recently ended a nine-month contract as a Syria Consultant for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).¹⁶⁸

Di Giovanni responded to questions, via email, just before heading off to Iraq to cover the crisis in Mosul for *Newsweek* in June. “I have found nothing unethical, no dilemmas—other than the time factor, of course... so more an issue of balancing my time than a moral one,” she wrote. “Both organizations—*Newsweek* and UNHCR—are places I am very proud to work for.” Di Giovanni said she never took simultaneous travel assignments from *Newsweek* and UNHCR. When she quoted a UNHCR report in a *Newsweek* story, she identified herself as an advisor to UNHCR.

Charles Sennott, cofounder of the international news website GlobalPost (where I worked before coming to Human Rights Watch), said he sees a natural convergence between advocacy and journalism. “Any good journalist advocates for human rights,” said Sennott, a former foreign correspondent for the *Boston Globe*. His latest project is GroundTruth, a nonprofit, investigative arm of GlobalPost that is funded mainly by foundations like Ford and Henry Luce. GroundTruth doesn’t shy away from taking a clear view on issues like [global income inequality](#)¹⁶⁹ or [drones](#).¹⁷⁰ Sennott calls this work “social justice journalism.” Furthermore, he has no problem using work from journalists on assignment for advocacy or aid groups, as long as these relationships are spelled out clearly to his readers.

Conventional Definitions Be Gone

Editors weren’t very open to these kinds of arrangements when I graduated from Columbia Journalism School fifteen years ago, but much has changed since then. And while I am concerned about how financially untenable and unsafe it is for freelance journalists to work abroad these days, I’m glad there are now options beyond the traditional foreign correspondent route, through assignments and jobs with groups like Human Rights Watch.

Now when recent graduates ask me for advice on reporting internationally, I tell them not to worry if an outlet or a gig meets the conventional definition of journalism. I suggest they find work that will allow them to learn about and report on subjects that matter to them. And that's what is promising about international reporting today. Journalists are deciding what matters to them and they're going after it. Some may be using journalistic techniques but calling themselves advocates. Either way, the space to do international investigative reporting, traditionally found within mainstream news outlets, is now just as likely to be available at a nonprofit startup, through a collective of freelancers, or at an advocacy group.

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