The Media Revolution: Changing the World

Nicco Mele, Nic Newman, Joshua Tucker, Jeff Jarvis, Courtney Radsch, Maria Ressa, Lydia Cacho Ribeiro, Jason Rezaian, Yeganeh Rezaian, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, David Brancaccio
About the Camden Conference

Now in its 33rd year, this midwinter event in Midcoast Maine is routinely cited as an outstanding example of civic engagement, as it brings in experts from around the world to discuss and debate issues of international import. This past February, speaker Kathleen Hall Jamieson of the University of Pennsylvania hailed the Camden Conference as “democratic engagement in action.”

The three-day event plays out before a capacity audience in the beautiful Camden Opera House and is live-streamed to locations in Portland, Belfast, and Rockland, as well as Hanover, N.H. Each of the Maine locations includes a contingent of students from high schools and colleges throughout the state, who study the topic as part of their curriculum in the months prior. Additional social and substantive activities are planned for those students in the various locations over the course of the weekend.

The Camden Conference is primarily a volunteer organization with just two paid staff members. Preparations for each February’s conference are ongoing throughout the year, beginning with the first meetings of the program committee in April, mapping out the structure and choosing presenters for the following February’s selected topic. Other committees will be working on plans for the student programs in consultation with their dedicated teachers; the scheduling of as many as 75 community events related to the topic in libraries throughout the state; the monitoring of the organization’s financial health, and, of course, the raising of funds from foundations, businesses, and individuals. Ticket prices cover only one-half of Camden Conference costs.

Previous Camden Conferences have examined New World Disorder, Refugees and Global Migration, Religion as a Force in World Affairs, and The Global Politics of Food and Water. The conference has also focused on geopolitical areas, including China, Russia, the Middle East, Asia, Europe, and Africa. The February 2020 Camden Conference, “The Media Revolution: Changing the World,” examined how the digital age has changed journalism and communications at home and abroad. Our 2021 conference will examine the geopolitical competition and tension generated by the warming of the Arctic Circle.

The Camden Conference is a nonpartisan, federally tax-exempt, not-for-profit 501(c)(3) corporation. The board of directors includes residents of several Midcoast towns, all of whom volunteer their time, talent, and energy to organize the conference and related programs. Financial support for the Camden Conference comes from attendance fees, memberships, individual gifts, and grants from institutions, foundations, and corporations.
Moderated by David Brancaccio

The 2020 Camden Conference brought together a stellar roster of experts to examine “The Media Revolution: Changing the World,” covering issues that included persecution of courageous journalists by authoritarian governments, disinformation on social media, the Russian influence on the 2016 presidential campaign, and the overall impact of the digital age on journalism and how we communicate generally.

More than 1200 were in the Camden Opera House and the four satellite, live-stream locations in Belfast, Rockland, Portland, and Hanover, N.H. Others in the audience watched the 2020 Camden Conference at home, through the member portal as a benefit of membership. More than 200 of our attendees were high school and college students.

This issue of Highlights distills the messages of our speakers. It seeks to convey the main points of each speaker’s presentation. To view the 2020 Conference in its entirety, go to the Camden Conference website at www.camdenconference.org.
Nicco Mele began his keynote address by pointing out the rapid change over the last 50 years in how we get our news. We heard about President Kennedy’s assassination over the radio or television. A half century later, when Osama bin Laden was killed, most of us got the news through the internet.

Going back to 1910, when England’s Edward VII died, Mele noted that “Every nation in the world sent their biggest ships, their biggest guns, their biggest jewels” to the funeral. The historian Barbara Tuchman called it “the most opulent event in human history.”

A few months later, England’s new King George, in a letter to his cousins, the czar of Russia and the kaiser of Germany, was to comment, “Just imagine in 2010 when our grandchildren are the monarchs of Europe and the colonies.” As Mele pointed out, when King George sent his letter in 1910, the traditional monarchical system had already “rotted out... It was actually over, but they couldn’t see it from where they were standing. And that is very much what I feel like is happening today, that the institutions of the 20th century, they’ve in many ways rotted out.”

And modern technology has added “another layer of instability to this kind of madness.” Mele then paused before re-emphasizing his title: “Remember rule number one: It will get crazier.”

Looking back over the 20th century, Mele noted the similarities to 1910—that today’s “prevailing vehicles of power are headed for some significant corrections.” And, he emphasized, “Our media has had a lot to do with this.”

He cited the development of computers as the major driving force behind these changes. In 1962, Purdue was the first American university to offer a major in computer science. And for those who got a degree with that major in the 1960s, the only place that was interested in hiring them was the Pentagon. But, of course, in the America of the late ’60s, at the height of the Vietnam war, few college graduates were interested in working for the Pentagon.

In the early ’70s, the enormous computers that were available only to corporations and universities cost $10 million—and it took two weeks to get answers from them to proposed questions.

In 1973, Ted Nelson authored a book with the title, Computer Lib: You Can and Must Understand Computers Now. It proposed a radical idea—personal computers. “Take power away from the institutions,” it suggested. But even it didn’t quite grasp the importance of computers down the road: “In the future,” it predicted, “hundreds of people will have their own computers—and thousands will want them.”

Mele showed slides illustrating that in the early ’70s, computers filled a small room; by the ’80s, they were beginning to appear on every office desk; in the ’90s, they could plug into each other to share printers; in the 2000s, the internet developed; and over the last ten years, we walk around with handheld devices that are infinitely stronger than those room-size computers of less than half a century ago.

Nicco Mele

We walk around with handheld devices that are infinitely stronger than those room-size computers of less than half a century ago.
In fact, Mele noted, all the information created from the beginning of human history to 2010—from cave paintings to Mesopotamian clay tablets to illustrated manuscripts to the printing press, and then radio, television, and the internet—equals the amount of information that was created in the last four hours. It is, of course, impossible for anyone to navigate all this information. “It’s knocking all our norms and institutions and traditional values out of whack.” The internet is ultimately about “this enormous diffusion of power.”

And what, Mele asked, has this meant for the media and journalism?

“We talk about the Rust Belt as a result of the collapse of the steel industry. But we have no term for what has happened to journalism, though its collapse has obvious consequences.”

Newspapers have lost over 80% of their revenues in the last two decades. Comparing the steel industry with journalism over the past four decades, he pointed out that in 1980 there were 391,000 steelworkers; in 2015, 142,000. In 1980, there were 412,000 journalists; in 2015, 173,000. We talk about the Rust Belt as a result of the collapse of the steel industry. But we have no term for what has happened to journalism, though its collapse has obvious consequences. Today, 21 states have no local newspapers with reporters based in Washington. That means there are 42 senators who are never questioned by journalists from their home states about the local impact of Senate activities.

Meanwhile, trust in newspapers has collapsed. In 1973, 50% of Americans expressed “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of trust in journalism. That figure is now 25%. The same decline, Mele noted, has occurred with regard to television news. Indeed, Congress is the only institution that’s fared worse in terms of decline in trust by the American public. But, Mele pointed out, the decline of trust in the media is a worldwide phenomenon. Primarily, it’s a result of there being so much more junk news—more misinformation—available on the internet.

As a result of all the misinformation we are exposed to, Mele said, rumors are “sticky”—they cling to us: “The brain loves rumors.” Facebook, YouTube, and other internet sources put out enormous amounts of information, but they don’t differentiate between what’s true and what’s not.

Further, he added, in today’s world, “corrections backfire.” Mele gave as an example the oft-repeated statement during his presidency that “Obama is a Muslim is a lie.” Over 100,000,000 Americans heard this, and despite the frequent denials, the rumor itself gave life to the lie.

There is no real solution to this, Mele said. With the collapse of once-trusted local news sources, and the fact that the digital platform is “opaque,” truth becomes hard to measure. Americans trust our digital system, which doesn’t focus on truth or veracity.

We are at the beginning of a generation-long collapse of traditional institutions. “It always makes me think back to our Founding Fathers,” he said. “They only knew one form of government—hereditary monarchy.” And even though in many cases they weren’t friends—“like Jefferson and Adams, they really didn’t like each other that much—but they all came together to figure out a new way of doing things.”

Mele concluded with the thought that the Founding Fathers are “a great inspiration” for today: to help us re-imagine, as a country, as a world—even in our individual relationships—where we might go as “we face the significant challenges ahead.”

Reported by Mac Deford

NICCO MELE is on the faculty at the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School. He is also faculty co-chair of the Harvard Council on the Responsible Use of Artificial Intelligence. As director of the Shorenstein Center from 2016 to 2019, Mele started new programs focused on understanding misinformation on social networks, sustainable models for local journalism, institutional anti-racism in media and algorithms, and platform accountability. His prior experience includes founding technology companies, working on political campaigns, and a stint as a media executive at the Los Angeles Times. He is a board member of the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard and a senior fellow at the University of Southern California’s Annenberg Center on Communication Leadership & Policy. His many publications include the 2013 international bestseller, The End of Big: How The Digital Revolution Makes David The New Goliath.
Newman described his specialty as “pure research into audiences and ... technology and different aspects of journalism, comparative and international in scope.” His organization, the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, is “the largest ongoing news server in the world, going since 2012, and currently in 38 markets, with a focus on Europe and North America, but also with coverage in Asia, Latin America, and Africa.”

Newman showed slides demonstrating the variation in internet penetration in different markets. He added that although Reuters doesn’t cover some authoritarian countries, it had evidence that there was significant internet penetration in Russia (around 75%) and in China (60%). He cautioned that his data were based on online polling and might slightly underrepresent traditional news behaviors, such as television, print, and radio. Newman noted that the same questions are asked every year in order to track changes over time.

A series of slides accompanied Newman’s talk, showing the weekly reach of four different sources of news over the last seven years, with online access pretty flat, TV news declining significantly, and print consumption declining by almost half, but social media enjoying a huge increase. Patterns were, however, different in different countries. Newman singled out Germany, where TV remained an important news source, as did online sourcing. As in the U.S., German print usage had halved, while usage of social media was slightly lower than America’s.

But, behind these averages, Newman saw “an even more interesting story,” namely that of people’s preferred way of accessing news, according to age. “Under-35s and the 18- to 24-year-olds significantly preferred online news sites and social media, whereas over-55s essentially preferred the media they grew up with, print or television news.”

The other big shift seen since 2012 is that, within digital media, the majority of news access is now via smartphones. The real challenges today, Newman posited, are getting and keeping people’s attention, and attracting advertising revenue, much of which has gone to the big online platforms (i.e., Facebook and Google). These goals have caused a shift toward different business models, such as direct reader payment. In the U.S., 16% now pay for some online news, a big shift since 2016, driven perhaps “by liberals subscribing to the New York Times and the Washington Post as a way of holding Donald Trump to account.”

In the Nordic countries, publishers “are protected to some extent by language and have a bit more control in the market.” In Norway, for example, 34% now pay directly for online news. Elsewhere, “There is a substantial minority who now recognize that you get what you pay for,” and most of this growth is confined to a small number of publishers, such as the New York Times, the Washington Post, and the Wall Street Journal. Many of these readers are better educated or richer, a “relatively small pool.” Another big challenge for getting people to pay directly is the power of intermediaries such as Facebook and Google.

On average across the countries surveyed, 29% now say they prefer to go directly to a website or app, about 28% use a social media site such as Facebook or Twitter, 7% use a mobile alert, 6% employ an aggregator such as Apple News or Google News, and 6% use email.
And there are the various algorithms that deliver news to people, with around half of the news that people see selected for them now by computers, not journalists. As for cultural differences, in Finland 64% prefer direct access, while in Latin America more than 40% say they prefer news access via social media, and only 19% prefer to go directly to a news brand.

Newman characterized other countries (such as the U.S., Canada, and Ireland) as “pick and mix,” where “Loyalists who identify with a news brand go directly, while others will use search, social media, or other methods. Asian countries, like Korea and Japan, access almost exclusively through big online portals or search engines, like Yahoo in Japan or Naver and Daum in Korea.” Social platforms are stronger in some countries than others, which often changes their roles and influence in news. A surprising fact shown by Newman’s slides was that use of Facebook, although still strong, has decreased since 2016, partly because of their own strategies and changes in algorithms, but also because they’re showing a bit less news in their feed. Also, many young people have switched from Facebook to other platforms designed with the smartphone in mind.

Again, it’s slightly different in different countries, but it’s really a change to “more visual networks.” For example, WhatsApp is used differently in different cultures. In the Global South, it’s now the main way people discuss and share news. Its popularity is one of the reasons why WhatsApp has been used to spread misinformation in countries such as India, South Africa, and Brazil. In the U.S., however, only 4% use WhatsApp for news.

Regarding misinformation, “It’s no coincidence,” said Newman, “we find most concern in countries like Brazil and South Africa, where over 70% say they’re concerned about what is real and fake news on the internet. We also see concern in the UK, partly because of the polarization around Brexit. By contrast, you see much lower levels of concern in the Netherlands, Germany, and Switzerland, where there’s been less false information and fewer misleading statements by politicians.”

More positively, concern about misinformation seems to be changing behavior online among the young. Globally, Newman found that “26% say they now rely more on reputable sources than a year ago, 40% in the U.S.”

Even in the U.S., if you look at trust by political allegiance, you see a different story between people who self-identify on the left, whose trust levels in the media increased from 34% to 51% after Trump’s election, whereas on the right, trust continues to collapse.

Small wonder that 28% in the U.S. say they feel worn out by the news, and 32% say that they often avoid the news because it makes them feel depressed.

Regarding audio, Newman termed it “one of the hottest topics in media.” Some 36% worldwide listen monthly to a podcast. Again Newman saw an age difference, with “under-35s listening proportionately four times more than over-65s.”

To conclude, Newman stated that “We’re now moving into an era of disruption,” as well as an era of new possibilities. The disruptions cause significant changes online, fragmenting consumption, etc., but they “offer lots of positives too, such as more speed, and more choice. But they also bring us more unreliable news, leading to a decline in trust and disrupting business models.” Newman noted “the shift away from advertising models toward more diversification of revenue sources and different kinds of reader payment. Trust in the media, he noted, “continues to fall in many countries, partly because of the behavior of populist politicians, but also undermined by the media’s own actions over many years, including clickbait ... and negative coverage.”

He added, “We’re also seeing this move from open social networks like Facebook to more usage and sharing of information in private groups and private messaging apps, as well as new shifts in formats driven by the devices people are using.”

REPORTED BY CHARLES GRAHAM
Joshua Tucker began his presentation by referencing two articles from the *Journal of Democracy*. The first, “all the way back” in 2011, when the term social media was coined, was titled “Liberation Technology.” The internet would spread and strengthen democracy worldwide, it said. By 2017, one year after the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the same *Journal of Democracy* published the article, “Can Democracy Survive the Internet?”

Tucker and colleagues from New York University’s Center for Social Media and Political Participation (SMaPP) set about a series of studies to understand how the internet had become a double-edged sword, with one cutting edge the voice of the people and the other authoritarian censorship and propaganda. This initial work resulted in a SMaPP article in the same journal, “From Liberation to Turmoil.”

Tucker posited that the power of the internet to assist political organization, as witnessed in the Arab Spring, caught authoritarian regimes off guard. But it did not take long for them to respond. As Tucker phrased it, “the empire strikes back.”

The SMaPP work identified three major tools “empires” used to counter the democratic impact of the internet. First, power responded to threats to their regimes offline. They employed traditional tools such as suppressing dissidents, beating and jailing those in the anti-establishment movement, or murdering their sympathetic journalists. In Russia, the founder of the site VKontakte, which was critical of Putin, was forced to flee the country and was replaced by a Putin loyalist.

The second tool was censorship. China was notorious in its attempt to shut off access to the entire internet—with mixed results. When China restricted access to Instagram, a huge number of Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) were created, with visits to the *New York Times* and Google rapidly increasing.

The third method of regime response was online engagement. Online engagement attempts to influence online content to “… a more beneficial pro-regime … conversation.” Exemplifying this approach was creation of the Internet Research Agency in Russia, employing bots, automated
accounts that produce content, and trolls to spread clever misinformation in propaganda campaigns that influenced the 2016 U.S. elections.

Simultaneously, said Tucker, one finds the internet facilitating the formation of small-d democracy groups, such as Black Lives Matter and Occupy Wall Street, while also facilitating the organization of the 2017 march in Charlottesville by white supremacists. One of the phenomena of the internet is to provide amplification. The 2017 Women’s March was the largest march in the history of the United States, with four-and-a-half million people, while the Charlottesville march had 300 to 400. Yet, through tools such as bots, trolls, tweets, and fake news, there arose a sense of equivalency of the two. In a short time, the internet has become a potent manipulative force with a near sociopathic indifference to motive. The question for Tucker and SMaPP became how to understand the tools used to manipulate content and how to decode and interpret internet media.

In a study of fake news, Tucker employed four questions: Who produced the information? Who shared it? Who is exposed to it? and What is the impact of being exposed to it? In the aftermath of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, SMaPP realized they had the ability to look at fake news articles and who had shared them on Facebook.

First, the study showed that the majority of people, 91% in the sample, did not share any fake news stories on Facebook over the course of the 2016 election. A small number of people, however, shared a lot of fake news. The second main point was that the majority of fake news had a pro-Trump slant to it. There was not a lot of pro-Clinton fake news. Also, the fake news was more pleasing to conservatives than to liberals.

A major assumption at the beginning of the study was that as millennials tend to get most of their news online and through social media, they would be prone to share fake news. The surprise was that people over 65 on average shared seven times as many links to fake news websites as the millennials. Why is this so?

Tucker cited the Occam’s Razor explanation that millennials have greater digital literacy so are more able to identify veracity, or mendacity, in internet information. Tucker also explained a new study underway at SMaPP. Researchers are evaluating the ability of ordinary Americans to accurately identify fake news. They established two groups. One was made up of six hired professional fact checkers and the other was a group of 90 citizen fact checkers. Each group evaluated articles selected from five online news streams, ranging from conservative to liberal, including true and fake news. The evaluations were completed within the first 24 hours of the web article’s appearance. This fact-checking exercise was conducted Monday through Thursday for eight weeks.

The major conclusion is that people are not good at identifying false news. They are pretty good at identifying true news—about 70% of the crowd ranked true news correctly. But only 30% were able to correctly identify fake news. Identifying the source matters in correctly sorting accurate news from fake. People who are more politically knowledgeable are more likely to match the fact checkers. People who are more digitally literate tend to correlate better with the fact checkers.

Two factors, however, played pivotal roles in fact-checking: partisanship and truth bias. Conservatives are terrible at identifying false news that is from a conservative source. Liberals are equally bad at identifying false news from a liberal source. “Truth bias” has been identified by social psychologists and was confirmed in a subset of individuals encouraged to actively search the internet for news. This subset was more likely to match the fact checkers when news was true. Unfortunately, they were slightly more likely to think false news was true. As predicted by social psychologists, people are inclined to think things are true as opposed to false. “So this is also kind of depressing information,” commented Tucker.

SMaPP is no longer allowed to access Facebook data. In the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal and an increasing drumbeat for protecting privacy, Facebook has closed its data to outside organizations. The portal SMaPP used to access Facebook data, known as an API (application programming interface), is now gone. Data that might be used by outside researchers to understand, say, teenage suicide, will only be accessible to those who work for Facebook, and they may never be directed to study this dark aspect of social media.

Tucker closed with a plea, “... We really, really need to think about this privacy question. ...” He argued that only through independent outside analysis can we make objective decisions about the internet and truly understand the impact of social media on democracy.

Reported by Stephen Orsini
Hands Off Our Net!

Euphoria, dystopia, and moral panic

Jeff Jarvis

The headline says it all. Jeff Jarvis wants to slap the heavy hand of regulation away from the internet.

Jarvis told the Camden Conference audience that he would bring some context to the conference discussion by giving us the "entire history of media and print in about 90 seconds." Moving across the stage to illustrate a timeline, he started with Gutenberg in 1450 and ended with the birth of television in 1954, making stops in between for the first regularly published newspaper in 1605, the Statute of Anne copyright law in 1710, and the advent of the steel press and the rotary press powered by steam.

"Steam causes lots of papers to be made. It leads us to the penny press. It leads us to mass media and mass and the idea of advertising as well. 1844, telegraph erasing distance now across the world, changing the way the world works. 1900, broadcast radio starts up about then, 1950 television, 1954 I'm born as a child of television. It didn't ruin me I don't think, and then we go here today to 2020. Now what did I leave out—the internet, right? October of 1994 is when the commercial browser was released, so we're a little over 25 years from that.

“That is to say, in Gutenberg years, it is only 1475. We have barely begun. If the internet is as disruptive an entity as printing was, I'm too old to know whether that'll turn out to be true, but I think it is. I want to give you a cycle of how this happened culturally in print and I hope you will very easily see the parallels to today.’’

When print came out, said Jarvis, it was generally welcomed with open arms. “It was believed,” he said, “that printing was going to make books a lot cheaper, more volume. It would change education. It would change the access to information—hallelujah.’’

Then came the backlash. A Venetian scribe named Filippo de Stratta urged the doge, the man in charge of Venice, to control the press. “Let me read what he said about printers,” said Jarvis. “They shamelessly print at a negligible price material which may, alas, inflame impressionable youths, while a true writer dies of hunger.’’

In 1479 Pope Sixtus IV authorized the University of Cologne to control printing. In England, James Bainham was burned at the stake in 1532 for printing "harmful” books by Tyndale and Luther. The Vatican’s index of forbidden books came in 1559, the same year that England’s Privy Council declared that it would see to the reviewing of all books. It authorized the Stationers Company, The City of London Livery Company for the Communications and Content Industries, to seize “scandalous, malicious, schismatical, and heretical publications.”

“So now we come to our age, and I’m going to argue against every history professor who’s ever lived that there’s a parallel, right? But we have lessons to learn from the past. And I think what we see happening now is we’ve gone from a period of euphoria over technology ... to dystopia, and both of them can’t be right at the same time. I believe we're seeing in media, in my business, an outright moral panic about technology right now.”
Jarvis gave the audience a definition of moral panic, drawn from writer Ashley Crossman. “A moral panic is a widespread fear, most often an irrational one, that someone or something is a threat to the values, safety, and interests of a community or society at large. Typically, a moral panic is perpetuated by the news media, fueled by politicians, and often results in the passage of new laws or policies that target the source of the panic. In this way, moral panic can foster increased social control.”

Said Jarvis, “There’s lots of journalists I can point to who were fan boys and girls who’ve now turned into dystopian, depressed louts about technology. And … we see reporters doing things like blaming Facebook and Cambridge Analytica for Trump and the fall of democracy and our election and everything wrong with us, as if before this we were all dancing through daisies together, hand in hand.”

Jarvis told the conference attendees that he wondered if we are really against progress. “Is that what this has come to, this reaction that we have, this dystopia? Are we going to start smashing the looms? So of course, wherever there is this kind of atmosphere of fear and hatred, and worry about the future will come efforts to control, which we’ve seen before. And we see again now.”

Jarvis provided examples of current efforts to control the internet, starting with NetzDG in Germany. “There’s a new version of NetzDG … that would require the platforms to report behavior around fake speech to the police… The irony of all this stuff is that the attempt to take power away from the platforms only gives more power to the platforms, and Google now decides what should and should not be remembered. I would think, again, that Europe would be careful about the idea of erasing and rewriting history, that we all would be.”

Other control efforts cited by Jarvis include a new EU copyright directive, fake news laws in France and Singapore, and an Online Harms White Paper in the UK that is being turned into law and enforcement.

Turning to the U.S., Jarvis pointed to threats to Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, which says that platforms and publishers are not responsible for the content or activities of users on those platforms.

“Now, it also allows the platforms to go in and get rid of my dorkish comment. It gives them the freedom to do that, the sword and the shield. We should encourage that, because without 230 you’re liable for anything people do on your site.” Jarvis said that he is not against all regulation. He is a member of the Annenberg Public Policy Center’s Transatlantic High Level Working Group on Content Moderation and Freedom of Expression, headed by Susan Ness, a former FCC commissioner. “And there are visions of regulation that come out of this that I can stand behind. One is that platforms shouldn’t be told exactly what to do, but they should be held to account for what they promise to do.”

In closing, Jarvis said he wanted to remind his listeners of one important thing. “The net is a net good. Imagine our world … without the net, without the ability to look up things, without the ability to get information, without the ability to do things, without the ability to connect with people around the world. But, most important, what the net has enabled is for voices who were never heard in mainstream media … to finally be heard. So we have Me Too, we have Living While Black, we have voices that have always been there, but in a mainstream media that’s run entirely by people who look like me, old white men, who don’t have the lived experiences that they have, and don’t think it’s important, and don’t think it’s a big enough story, didn’t cover all these years. I treasure and cherish that.”

“Wherever there is this kind of atmosphere of fear, and hatred, and worry about the future will come efforts to control, which we’ve seen before. And we see again now.”

“It is 1475, we don’t know what the internet is yet. It’s up to us to invent what it can be. And it starts with listening.”

We are returning to the world before Gutenberg, said Jarvis, before text, before press. “We are a society relearning how to hold a conversation with ourselves. And that conversation can occur only if it begins with listening…. It is 1475, we don’t know what the internet is yet. It’s up to us to invent what it can be. And it starts with listening.”

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Journalists and the dangers of information warfare

Threats, accusations and attacks

Courtney C. Radsch

“...am the advocacy director of the Committee to Protect Journalists,” said Courtney Radsch, “and you may be thinking: We need a Committee to Protect Journalists? It is pretty crazy that, in this day and age, not only are journalists under threat around the world, but we need an entire committee that is dedicated to keeping them safe.”

Radsch underscored how dangerous the job of journalism is today in the age of information warfare by giving examples of investigative reporters Patricia Mello Campo of Brazil, Daphne Caruana Galizia of Malta, Rana Ayyub of India, Gauri Lankesh, also of India, Maria Ressa of the Philippines, Paul Chuta of Cameroon, Chen Qiushi of China, Ahmad Noorani of Pakistan, Javier Valdez of Mexico, and Jamal Khashoggi, the murdered Washington Post columnist.

In the 2000s, said Radsch, “When Patricia Mello Campo reported from hotspots and conflict zones as diverse as Iraq and Sudan, she knew that she had to wear personal protective gear. She had to keep herself safe. She had to have a security protocol, do risk assessments, but she never needed a bodyguard until she was reporting in Brazil, her home country, on presidential elections there. She was the target of a relentless trolling campaign following her reporting on President, then-candidate, Jair Bolsonaro. “The online smear campaign that Bolsonaro helped propel ... led to threats that made her fear for her safety. ... She had real reason to feel concerned, because the people who harassed her online would show up in the real world.”

The threats haven’t gone away, said Radsch. “Last week during a congressional hearing [in Brazil] on fake news, she was accused of selling sex for information. That accusation was then repeated publicly, including by president Bolsonaro’s son, who is also a congressman.”

Campo was again the target of “a massive trolling campaign that has ... put her in the crosshairs, threatening and undermining her work. These ... attacks against journalists can have a ripple effect that negatively impacts journalism, but also the ability to hold public officials accountable and inform the public.”

Radsch explained why these campaigns are a primary tactic of what she calls the “information warfare playbook.” Young people’s initial use of social media to effect cultural change became a model for governments to manipulate the internet for their own goals.

“So, around the world now, authoritarian governments and democratic governments alike are using the very same technologies ... to control and suppress independent reporting.”

Investigative reporter and blogger Daphne Caruana Galizia from Malta was assassinated by a car bomb just outside her home in 2017, after being a target for months of a campaign of both online and offline harassment. Said Radsch, “Pro-government Facebook groups, secret Facebook groups, would organize what the meme of the day was going to be. What was the main message going to be to undermine this investigative reporter who was reporting on corruption by the government and ruling elites? And then they would spread this into the public sphere on social media.”

Death, imprisonment, and disruption of reporting can result from information warfare. Radsch asked how journalists can know when online threats are going to lead to mortal attacks. “In India, investigative journalist Rana Ayyub wrote a
book examining the role of government officials in deadly sectarian riots in Gujarat during the tenure there of Narendra Modi, who was the chief minister at the time. And in 2018 pro-Modi social media accounts circulated memes about her, including a video, what we would call a deep fake of her face, put onto a pornographic video, circulated that online and led to a vitriolic campaign of harassment and hate. She got so concerned for her safety that she had to leave the country. …"

Radsch pointed out that another Indian journalist, Gauri Lankesh, was assassinated not long after she had translated Rana’s book. Lankesh herself had published anti-extremist news and was critical of right wing extremists. … Gauri’s final editorial was titled ‘In the Age of Fake News’ and lamented how disinformation and propaganda on social media were poisoning the political environment.”

Since 1981 the Committee to Protect Journalists has worked “to protect journalists and their right to report the news safely and without fear of reprisal. We’ve been tracking cases of journalists who are murdered and imprisoned for their work, reporting systematically, documenting these attacks and daily threats. So we know that the contemporary environment, this threat to press freedom … and the free flow of information is unprecedented. While we saw a dramatic decline in the number of journalists killed and murdered for their work last year, we don’t know yet if this was a blip or a trend,” continued Radsch.

She noted that although deaths are down, imprisonments have dramatically increased: more than 250 per year for the past four years.

Radsch told the audience, “The most dangerous beat for journalists is politics. Censorship in the age of information warfare means targeting journalists who attempt to report on sensitive targets and drowning out legitimate journalism.”

Radsch said that across the globe politics is being influenced by manipulated social media campaigns, including during elections. “A multimillion-dollar industry devoted to running influence operations and information warfare has emerged, and it is increasingly marketing its propaganda and influence services to political parties and candidates.”

CPJ has developed a safety kit for election coverage that features both the physical and digital safety information necessary. Radsch added, “We are helping to give them the tools that they need to try to keep themselves safe and counteract the information warfare playbook.”

She noted, “The intersection of disinformation campaigns and online harassment of journalists in the context of elections is one of the gravest threats to press freedom that we are currently dealing with. It’s also a threat to democracy more broadly.”

The financial disparity between governments and journalism today makes the mission for factual reporting ever more daunting.

When you have governments manipulating the social media platforms, “propaganda campaigns and disinformation operations [are] amplified and regurgitated on social media, and they look just like news.”

Radsch discussed how Russia, the United States, China, Mexico and other countries have used information technology to disseminate disinformation and intimidate or threaten journalists. She stressed that today’s journalists need a technological platform of their own to counteract the powerful machinations of authoritarian governments that bend the truth to suit their own agendas. “Journalists need governments to stop attacking them and instead put in place laws and policies so that they have some capacity to do what they can do on their own.”

In closing, Radsch reminded her audience, “Until journalists are free to do their work without violence, censorship, and intimidation, the true potential of the information revolution will not be realized.”

Reported by Karin Knudsen Rector

COURTNEY C. RADSCH, PhD, is advocacy director at the Committee to Protect Journalists. She serves as chief spokesperson on global press freedom issues for the organization and oversees CPJ’s engagement with the United Nations, the Internet Governance Forum, and other multilateral institutions, as well as CPJ’s campaigns on behalf of journalists killed and imprisoned for their work. As a veteran journalist, researcher, and free expression advocate, she frequently writes and speaks about the intersection of media, technology, and human rights. Her book Cyberactivism and Citizen Journalism in Egypt: Digital Dissidence and Political Change was published in 2016. Prior to joining CPJ, Radsch worked for UNESCO, edited the flagship publication World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development, and managed the Global Freedom of Expression Campaign at Freedom House. She has worked as a journalist in the United States and Middle East with Al-Arabiya, the Daily Star, and the New York Times. Radsch holds a PhD in international relations from American University. She speaks Arabic, French, and Spanish.

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Maria Ressa launched the social news network Rappler in 2012 and is its current CEO. She began her talk at the 2020 Camden Conference by defining what she sees as the problem in journalism today.

“The problem is very simple. We’re at an existential moment for journalism. And when journalists are under attack, democracy is under attack. In my case, I will show you how our democracy crumbled within six months, our institutions crumbled, and how we came under attack—11 cases and investigations in a little over a year. I have paid more in bonds and bail than Imelda Marcos, who’s been convicted in four different countries.”

For any who may think the problems of Filipino journalists are confined to the Philippines, Ressa pointed out that “Our dystopian present is your dystopian future.” She explained: “Cambridge Analytica whistleblower Chris Wylie focused on the Philippines and called us the Petri dish. He said that Cambridge Analytica tested out tactics of mass manipulation [using social media] in the Philippines and countries like ours in the Global South. When they worked, they were transported over to the United States and Europe. Digital products are tested for you first in the Philippines and then they decided to seed what would divide our societies.”

It was a decision to grow the platform by encouraging “friends of friends.” Growing platforms that way, said Ressa, divided people into like-minded communities.

Authoritarian governments, Ressa said, quickly picked up on the power of social media and deployed it to exert control. “Let’s not call it social media, let’s call it a behavioral modification system. And we are Pavlov’s dogs because we walked into this. Technology has been the accelerant that has helped bring to power authoritarian-style leaders who have slowly turned their democracies into dictatorships.”

She credited author Tim Snyder with the following quote about authoritarian use of social media: “If you want to rip the heart out of a democracy, you go after facts. That’s what modern authoritarians do. Step one, you yourself lie all the time. Step two, you say it’s your opponents and the journalists who lie. Step three, everyone looks around and says, ‘What’s the truth? There is no truth.’ Then resistance is over.”

“The question I ask Rappler [staff] all the time is, ‘What does civic engagement look like in the age of social media, when we have alternative realities?’ But the reality is there aren’t alternative realities. There are facts. There’s one person standing on stage waving her hands, right? That’s a fact. It’s not debatable, unless I pound it a million times. I have bots, I pay people, and I say, ‘there are a hundred people on stage,’ and someone will believe it. Most will believe it, because it will spread faster on social media. The biggest problem is this: A lie told a million times becomes a fact. Without the facts, you can’t have truth. Without truth, you can’t have trust. If you have no facts, no truth, no trust, you have no democracy. This is what we need to fight for.”

How did the Duterte government go after Maria Ressa and her media company, Rappler, in attempts to silence them? Any journalist that reports on or questions the killing of people by the government is going to be attacked. The question is, ‘How do we fight back?’

“The problem with social media such as Facebook, she said, began with one very simple decision made by a tech person. “When they wanted to grow their social media platform, they decided to seed what would divide our societies.”

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of 27,000 people in a brutal drug war led by Duterte’s government over the past three years is a target of the government, she said. Ressa called herself a cautionary tale for anyone who wants to fight for the truth.

“Combine … online and offline violence to create a climate of fears. That is what our president has done, our government has done. … Patriotic trolling—that’s what we called it, state-sponsored online hate and harassment campaigns to silence and intimidate. There are two ways they attack you. They pound you to silence and then they incite other people to attack, incite hate. And this happens exponentially. When we did our first propaganda war series in 2016, I got an average of 90 hate messages per hour. It’s a new weapon, and women in the Philippines are targeted at least 10 times more than men. Instead of censoring, you just flood the market with lies, because people can’t tell the difference.

“I took care of my reputation for 30-some years. That’s all the journalist has. Imagine. How do I fight back against somebody saying, she’s a criminal. She’s corrupt, corrupt, corrupt. … You inflame the biases, fuel misogyny, you degrade that person as a sexual object. …

“The first amendment, the freedom of speech, guys, it doesn’t work when you have no rules of the marketplace. … With me, in May 2017 they tried to trend #arrestMariaRessa. It didn’t trend, which is probably why it took another two years before they actually arrested me.”

Rappler, which currently employs about 100, has had to change its business model in response to pressures from the Duterte government. Initially it had relied heavily upon advertising. When charges were brought against the news website, many advertisers stopped doing business with Rappler. Changes in the business model made it more reliant upon crowdfunding, membership, and B2B relationships. The market has responded, and the revenue stream has improved. Ressa reported that Rappler is now profitable.

How can legitimate journalists fight back against the onslaught of a frontal attack on the press by government?

“You attack them with the full force of the law. I’m still free, even though I have to post bail. So it’s kind of like a game of chicken. You know, you make them cautionary tales for anyone demanding truth. What are we going to do? You start with your area of influence, in your own area of influence. Demand accountability from power. Stand up against bullies. Report the lies. Tell your family and friends. Courage spreads. We begin by taking care of what’s in front of us.”

Reported by Bruce Cole

Rappler has had to change its business model in response to pressures from the Duterte government.

MARIA RESSA is the CEO, executive editor, and a founder of Rappler, a six-year-old company that is one of the leading online news organizations in the Philippines. Ressa has been honored around the world for her courage in fighting disinformation, “fake news,” and attempts to silence the free press. In 2018, she was named a Time magazine Person of the Year and won the Golden Pen of Freedom Award from the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers, the Knight International Journalism Award of the International Center for Journalists, the Gwen Ifill Press Freedom Award of the Committee to Protect Journalists, the Journalist of Courage and Impact Award of the East-West Center, and the IX International Press Freedom Award of University of Málaga and UNESCO, among others. She was also listed on Time’s list of 100 most influential people in 2019. She has been a journalist in Asia for more than 30 years. She was CNN’s bureau chief in Manila and then Jakarta, focusing on terrorism in Southeast Asia and authoring two books, Seeds of Terror: An Eyewitness Account of al-Qaeda’s Newest Center of Operations in Southeast Asia and From Bin Laden to Facebook.
Lydia Cacho, a Mexican journalist-activist who writes about human trafficking around the world, argued throughout her talk that activism is the “new journalism that is truly saving our communities. And if we do that all over the world, we will end up changing the narrative of journalism and using the media as a revolutionary tool.”

Cacho began her story, “I am alive today because I had to run away from home, Mexico, because I am a journalist, and I’m a human-rights activist. They tried to kill me. They went inside my house, killed my dogs and tried to kill me, and I had to flee last July. That was the seventh time in my life as a journalist that I had to flee my home in order to stay alive.”

Cacho began writing about violence against women as a young journalist 30 years ago. She went on to write about HIV/AIDS in tourist areas in Mexico where there was extensive male as well as female prostitution. After being threatened by the governors in the area and writing that she had been threatened, she found herself approached by young people wanting to tell their stories and asking for help. “So I helped these kids and, I said, ‘Listen, we have to open something.’ So we ended up opening this house where they could get health services.” A newspaper in Mexico City picked up the story and people working with HIV/AIDS more broadly helped. The result was a small hospital in Cancun and Cacho’s realization that journalist activists can make a difference for good.

In 2003 Cacho was investigating the case of a 14-year-old girl who escaped from a man who was raping her. “I found out there were more and more girls and boys that were abused and exploited, sexually exploited, in a fancy hotel in Cancun. And not all of them were Mexican. Some of them were American, some of them were middle-class; and all of a sudden I knew it was something bigger than I ever thought.” Cacho told the story on television and was fired by the television station “because these guys were really rich and powerful and friends of the governor.”

In her work, she determined there were five governors, four senators and “hundreds of clients that they brought in and out from these fancy hotels to have sex with children.”

“That’s one of the reasons why... I cannot be at home right now; because they don’t like what I did and what I keep doing, which is telling the truth.”
from 4 years old to 14.” She wrote about the child pornography ring and ultimately found a young hacker who helped her find videos and pictures that supported the stories the young people were telling her. By the time she wrote the full story, she had already had seven death threats.

She subsequently wrote a book. Six months after it was published, “These guys came, closed the street, dressed as civilians ... took me, and they put me in a car and they arrested me. Later we found out they were policemen, ordered by one governor that was involved in this network, and they tortured me for twenty hours ... and they were going to kill me, but they did not kill me because before I published the book, I told the CPJ [Committee to Protect Journalists] and everybody else I was going to publish it, and I said, ‘Listen, if they kill me, if they arrest me, they disappear me, anything, you have all the evidence here, and you have all the evidence of who did it.’

Cacho ended up in jail, where she was beaten again. Ultimately she won the case against her, and the leader of the pornography network was sentenced (the first sentence for child pornography and human trafficking in Latin America) to 113 years. The policemen who arrested her were sentenced to two to five years in jail, and there are arrest warrants out internationally for the governors and businessmen involved.

“That’s one of the reasons why... I cannot be at home right now; because they don’t like what I did and what I keep doing, which is telling the truth.”

Cacho continued to write about child pornography and human trafficking all over the world. She continued to “investigate all the mafias and how they link to bankers through money laundering, how they link to political parties and how they use children and why child pornography is increasing all over the world. ... To do so, I need social media. And what happened to me in 2003—when they thought the internet wasn’t going to grow, and when I became a hacker and I thought, this is gonna be a onetime thing—it became a big part of my job, and that’s why I train so many young journalists.”

Cacho helped form an international network that uses social media to search for children who have disappeared. Hackers help one another find children and the pedophiles and traffickers who steal them all over the world. “We have found a lot of children that have been kidnapped by child pornographers and especially by human traffickers that want to sell them for sex. Now Mexico, Russia, and the U.S. are the three biggest producers and consumers of child pornography in the world.”

Cacho reminded the audience that pornographers often locate children through pictures and information family members and friends post on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. The pornographers and human traffickers are able to find and steal the children—the children disappear.

Cacho spoke further about changing journalism as she told the story of an editor who suggested she be a reporter, not an activist. The editor claimed she, and journalists like her, cannot change the world. She reminded him that the journalists who win awards now are those who are threatened but who go on telling their stories, that these journalist-activists are changing things. “It’s about the solutions that we find every time we type something in the internet to help somebody that has been abducted or a journalist kidnapped or somebody that is in danger somewhere in the world. It’s about funding, like, ten bucks a month, a news outlet that is different, that is doing good investigative reporting, for example, anywhere in the world. ... It’s about going back to the basics of ethics, creating a new narrative. ...”

She said she reminded the editor and other journalists to “take the good examples of what works and then go for it ... stop complaining about the situation from your desks. Please.”

Cacho has written 17 books and does reporting for newspapers and magazines. A recent book, for children, is about schoolchildren who are internet sleuths and help find a stolen classmate. As a result of that book, she has been invited to many schools to talk with students about what they can do to change the world.

Cacho ended her talk as she began, speaking about the importance of activism, not only among journalists: “I absolutely believe that this is an important moment for humanity. ... We have to go back to repeating, once a day, at least, the words ‘ethics’ and ‘values.’ And if we don’t, we will waste our own time, and maybe the lives of many, many people.”

Reported by Judy Stein
Editor’s note: Jason Rezaian and Yeganeh “Yegi” Rezaian sat down before the Camden Conference audience for an interview with David Brancaccio, conference moderator. In these excerpts, Jason and Yegi talk about their arrest by Iranian authorities in 2014, about Yegi’s release two-and-a-half months later, and about the efforts that led to Jason’s release after 18 months in custody, during which he was convicted of espionage in a secret trial. The excerpts have been edited for length and clarity.

What kind of work were you doing and why did they come after you?

JASON: The first part’s a little bit easier than the second. I moved to Iran in the spring of 2009, from the San Francisco Bay area, originally. My dad was from Iran. My mom was from Wheaton, Illinois. These two people, who decided to take very different paths away from their conservative upbringings, met at the library at San Francisco State University in the ’60s.

I was always fascinated with my dad’s homeland, growing up in the ’80s. I began traveling quite a bit around the world in the late ’90s, when I was in my early twenties, and I went around the world, but the Holy Grail for me was always Iran. And I knew that I wanted to be a journalist.

I thought that if I would be able to travel to Iran at some point, I could work from that place. Very few Western journalists were based there. Flash forward to 2009. After several trips getting to know the place, I picked up and moved there full-time as a freelancer. In the first year I met Yegi, who was working as a translator.

In 2014, we were two-fifths of the English-language newspaper media in Iran. And our home was sort of a hotbed for a lot of activity. This was after the current president Hassan Rouhani was elected in 2013. There was an opening, if you will, and media was allowed back in. Negotiations between the U.S. and Iran, for the first time since the revolution, were taking place at a very high level, over the nuclear file. And I was covering that story very closely, as was Yegi.

One night in late July of 2014 we were preparing to go to a surprise birthday party for her mom.

“[W]hen the elevator doors opened, there were three men standing there, one of them with a gun pointed right at me.”

We walked out the front door of our high-rise apartment, took the elevator down to the basement where the garage was. And when the elevator doors opened, there were three men standing there, one of them with a gun pointed right at me. And these three people forced their way into the elevator, took us back up to our apartment, which they proceeded to ransack over the next couple of hours. Yegi and I were separated in our own home, forced to relinquish our passwords to our devices. They confiscated all of our identification documents, our passports, and after a couple of hours very unceremoniously told us it was time to go. They paraded us out in front of neighbors. We were put in the back of a van with tinted windows, blindfolded and handcuffed, and taken off to Evin prison.
“[W]hat happened to us was that we were part of a campaign by internal forces in the Iranian regime that did not want to see [the nuclear] deal go forward.”

And, for context, this is 2014. This is during a time of relative thaw in U.S. Iranian relations. Obama is president. The U.S.–Iran nuclear agreement has not been ratcheted back. That wouldn’t happen for another three years.

JASON: The negotiations were really just beginning in earnest. I had just returned from a session of those talks in Vienna, 48 hours before we were arrested. It took months to really understand, but what happened to us was that we were part of a campaign by internal forces in the Iranian regime that did not want to see that deal go forward.

So you are also detained, Yegi, but you get out ahead.

YEGI: Yes. I think it’s it worth saying that I was not a U.S. citizen at the time and, proudly, I am now. It took only four years. First of all, they were not sure if we were married. After they found out that, yes, we were married, it was their tactic to keep me there for two-and-a-half months, the entire time in solitary, because I was the wife of the “American spy.” Part of it was to use that as a pressure point to force him to admit to things that he didn’t do.

They would go and ask him questions and interrogate him for hours and then they would bring those questions to me. So after two-and-a-half months, they were finished. JASON: It’s worth noting that the day that we were arrested, we were given one-year extensions of our press credentials in Iran. So we had been vetted by the system but detained by a competing intelligence branch of the government.

When Yegi was released, that was the biggest weight off my shoulders, as you can imagine. But it was also a warning sign that I might be there for a very long time, and I had no window into what was being done in the outside world. I was kept in solitary confinement for seven weeks, and then I was placed in a larger cell with one other person who I ultimately ended up spending 13 months with.

What are some of the forces that came together to secure your release? Do you know even now?

YEGI: I would say his mom and his brother played a very, very major role. They were my contacts to the outside world, because I was released under 12 conditions, including not having any social media presence, not talking to media. They took my press credentials away, so I couldn’t work as a journalist. His brother was my voice with the outside world.

JASON: It always starts with your family being willing to speak out about what’s going on. And I think my brother was very effective at lobbying people in Washington to give a damn. I credit Marty Baron and the Washington Post, my editor Doug Jehl. I’m a big fan of Jeff Bezos, because he went to great lengths to make sure that I was freed. My member of Congress from Marin County, where I grew up, Jared Huffman, became a very vocal and committed advocate. And I can’t forget Anthony Bourdain. We were lucky enough to be interviewed for his show when he came to Iran.

YEGI: Five weeks before we were arrested.

JASON: Within a couple of weeks, he had written an op-ed. He spoke about us on TV; he was in constant communication with the State Department. If you pick up a copy of my book, you will see that it’s part of the Anthony Bourdain imprint. He was passionate about us telling our story and supporting us.

After your release, you get to Landstuhl air force base in Germany. And then, how do you get to the United States?

YEGI: We got on the plane from Tehran to Geneva, on a Swiss airplane from Geneva to Landstuhl, then traveled in Jeff
“Like anywhere else in the world, people [in Iran] want a freer, more open way of living. And now there’s a real sense of hopelessness in the country.”

Bezos’ private jet back to the United States. And because I was undocumented…it was eventually coordinated after many hours in the air that we would arrive in a more private, less busy airport. And we were just a handful of people—me, Jason, his mom, his brother, Jeff Bezos, his editor, and a Washington Post lawyer. That’s it.

A few minutes before we landed, they said we were going to Bangor, Maine. To me it sounded like Bangalore, and I was confused whether we were going to India or the United States. Finally we arrived. And there was a really nice DHS officer. He walked into our plane, and he had teary eyes, and he made all of us cry by saying, “Welcome to the country. I am so glad that you are healthy and they finally let you go. You know what? They know that if they screw with one of us, they screw with all of us.”

JA SON:

We went into the arrival hall, there was nobody there. There were several DHS officers and the airport chaplain. Yegi and the Post lawyer went in for her to be processed. When she came back, she was crying, and I said, “What happened, what’s wrong?” And she said, “Nothing’s wrong. I just feel so moved by the welcome that I’ve gotten from my new country and so ashamed of how my home country treated us.” And it was a really poignant moment.

The U.S. has withdrawn from the nuclear deal, dragged the Europeans to enforce sanctions, kicking and screaming. How does this play out in Iran for people who are trying to push for liberalization of a society that you have found so repressive?

JASON: I think that the repressive aspects of Iranian society are the official aspects of it. Like anywhere else in the world, people want a freer, more open way of living. And now there’s a real sense of hopelessness in the country. Yegi was telling me this morning about the number of coronavirus suspected cases, confirmed cases, five deaths already. We know about the Ukrainian airliner that was shot down there a few weeks ago by the Iranian regime. I think all of these things are reminders to the people of Iran that they don’t have any friends in the world, not in their own government and not in the West.

And we’re not at any level telegraphing that there is even tacit support for civil society.

JASON: We say that we are, but every move is designed to make their lives more difficult, with the intent of creating enough economic pressure through sanctions that they come out in droves into the street to protest the regime. That’s happened several times.

JASON REZAIA N is a Global Opinions writer for the Washington Post, a CNN contributor, and a vocal advocate for press freedom around the world and for Americans falsely imprisoned abroad. From 2009 to 2014, he was the lone American correspondent working in Iran for the international press. In July 2014, he and his wife, Yeganeh, were detained by Iranian authorities. The following year, he was convicted of espionage in a closed-door trial in Tehran and imprisoned until his release in January 2016. Rezaian’s story of his ordeal, Prisoner: My 544 Days in an Iranian Prison, was published in January 2019 and has now been reissued in paperback. He has won numerous awards, including the Ellis Island Medal of Honor, the National Press Club’s John Aubuchon Press Freedom Award, and the James W. Foley Legacy Foundation’s Press Freedom Award. He has been a Nieman Fellow at Harvard University (2017) and a Terker Distinguished Fellow, George Washington University (2016–2018). He is a graduate of the Eugene Lang College of Liberal Arts at the New School in New York.
There’s evidence that the Iranians were not wholeheartedly embracing the rules of the U.S.–Iran nuclear deal. I assume you would not have advocated the Trump administration’s decision to withdraw, but do you know what is a path forward that you think could bring people together?

JASON: I think they were actually adhering to the letter of the law of that deal, at least until 2018, when President Trump pulled us out of it. What message does that send to the rest of the world, when this pariah nation is holding up their end of the bargain and the U.S. says, “Eh, we’re going to take the ball and walk away and do something else?” I think any next moves with Iran are going to have to be in very close coordination with our allies. And when I say allies, I’m not talking about Saudi Arabia and the UAE. I’m talking about our traditional allies, our longstanding allies, and those people that still believe in a liberal order that seems to me to still be the best option that we have.

YEGI: I was going frantic, sobbing in the house. No Iranian wants war, I can say that for sure. But also we know that, just on our own, we won’t be able to access the freedom that we deserve. And that means we need a little bit of outside help, in a very civilized way, not by throwing bombs on us.

JASON: …or cutting off food and medicine.

We didn’t actually go to war, and there seems to be some back channel communication between Washington and Tehran to stop Armageddon. Is there, weirdly, some kind of opportunity now?

JASON: I think there’s always an opportunity. Yegi has talked over the past three years about her concerns that President Trump would make a deal with the Revolutionary Guard. I think that Secretary of State Pompeo would not let that happen. But I also think that he might not be the secretary of state for very long. Ultimately, we know that at some point we will come to some kind of negotiated settlement with Iran. And the folks I talk to in Washington who are involved in policy desperately want to see that happen. They can’t say that publicly. But there’s also this attitude that Iran needs a deal much more than the U.S. does. I think, in the short term, that’s probably true. But I also think that regional stability in the Middle East without Iran is impossible.

YEGANEH REZAIAN is an advocacy associate at the Committee to Protect Journalists. An Iranian journalist now living in Washington, D.C., she has written pieces for the Washington Post and The Lily. She previously worked as the communications director at the World Affairs Council–Washington, D.C. While living in Iran, Ms. Rezaian covered Iranian political, social, and economic news for Bloomberg News and The National until she and her husband, the former Washington Post Tehran bureau chief Jason Rezaian, were detained by Iranian authorities in 2014. Ms. Rezaian was jailed for 72 days and then fought for her husband’s freedom, which was not granted until January 2016.
Jamieson emphasized that we remember stories that capture facts and put them into a narrative. We must learn to be able to use the power of narrative, she said. As an example, she cited the button slogan #FreeJason, which carried a simple and powerful message—that Washington Post reporter Jason Rezaian was being held in prison in Iran for nothing more than doing his job as a reporter. The button carried a narrative and helped spread the message. It served as a kind of “digestive,” making a point that was memorable and encoded facts. The digital communications media further relayed Jason’s story outward, allowing more and more people to learn about his case and care about it. It helped assimilate data into a story, a frame—that he was a journalist, not a spy (as the Iranian authorities accused him of being).

Instead of referring to “fake news,” we should use terms such as “imposter sites,” sites that masquerade as sources of news but in fact peddle misinformation.

That is why fact-checking alone is not enough. We need effective frames for information, said Jamieson. They not only convey data, they also give us understanding about why things have happened. We need to set the context for information through the frames. This can help counter alternative frames that appeal to other enclaves. The frames are “axes of understanding.”

Jamieson explained that she thinks the term “fake news” should be avoided. If an item is news, it is not fake. If it is fake, it is not news. Rather, we should use terms such as “imposter sites,” i.e., sites that masquerade as sources of news but in fact peddle misinformation. The content they supply, transmitted via social media, is “viral deception,” or VD.

How do we cope with the problem of VD? One answer is civic engagement and community cooperation—of which the Camden Conference is a wonderful example, said Jamieson. Through civic engagement we can begin to isolate and eliminate VD.

But the bad news is that our journalists did a poor job in 2016 of covering the presidential election campaign. Hacked content was dropped into their newsrooms. Journalists had to deploy resources to deal with it, and as a result they allowed themselves to get distracted from their responsibilities. This led to a reporting frame in which the Access Hollywood video material about Trump was treated as equivalent to Hillary Clinton’s leaked email messages, ignoring the basic point—which should have been the frame for the coverage—that the hacked email messages were obtained by Russian intelligence agencies and strategically deployed through Wikileaks in order to discredit the Clinton campaign. This coverage by the major news media not only harmed the Clinton campaign, but it also exposed journalists to attacks.

The episode raises a serious question about how journalists should deal with hacked content. They cannot ignore it, said Jamieson, but they have to recognize its implications. They have to consider the fact that it may be altered or manufactured. They have to carefully examine the source and recognize that the information may have been released for strategic reasons. Certainly this makes life hard for journalists, who operate in a competitive environment and fear being scooped by other outlets. The answer, Jamieson emphasized, is not to “satisfice” (do a “good enough” job), but to work to earn the trust of audiences.
Similarly with her statement about Lincoln and the need for debates that left her vulnerable to appearing deceptive. The report then became the basis for questions during the impeachment process to create a false report of what she said. But this false report was to be another dump of massive amounts of material, political leaders sometimes have to take one position in public and another in private.

Focusing on the hacked material led to a stream of negative stories about the Clinton campaign. Moreover, reporters began taking material from Clinton’s paid speeches to banks out of context, repeating an inaccurate representation of what she had said. When she defended herself, Donald Trump was able to reinforce the impression that she was deceitful.

By hyping the hacked emails, the media became unwitting instruments of Russian propaganda and intelligence efforts.

In this episode, journalists succumbed to time pressure. By hyping the hacked emails, the media became unwitting instruments of Russian propaganda and intelligence efforts. The media framing of the stories, in turn, affected public opinion. Jamieson said out that polls showed a statistically significant increase in the percentage of voters who responded that Clinton was untrustworthy or “does not share my values” after the media coverage of the hacked material.

Jamieson pointed to media coverage of Clinton speeches, in which she supposedly said she dreamed of a hemispheric common market and open borders. Things she said were taken out of context and strung together in such a way as to create a false report of what she said. But this false report then became the basis for questions during the debates that left her vulnerable to appearing deceptive. Similarly with her statement about Lincoln and the need for debates that left her vulnerable to appearing deceptive.

The effect of Russian efforts to manipulate the outcome of the 2016 presidential election came not from Russian trolls, but from mainstream media coverage of the race.

In response to questions, Jamieson said that if there were to be another dump of massive amounts of material, journalists need to take the time at the very start of the process to check the source and the veracity of the material. The effect of Russian efforts to manipulate the outcome of the 2016 presidential election came not from Russian trolls, but from mainstream media coverage of the race.

Journalists often frame political races in “horse race” terms, that is, who is ahead and who is behind. Instead, it would be better if they framed their stories in terms of issues, and thought of their job as helping the public to understand the issues on which candidates take positions. Jamieson helped lead research using a simulation of the Philadelphia mayor’s race, where one group of voters was exposed to material about the issues—how would candidates solve particular problems—and another about the “tactical” side of the campaign. Voters who were exposed to purely tactical coverage grew more cynical, not just about the candidates, but about the entire process.

Reported by Thomas F. Remington

KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON is the Elizabeth Ware Packard Professor of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg School for Communication, the Walter and Leonore Annenberg Director of Penn’s Annenberg Public Policy Center, and program director of the Annenberg Retreat at Sunnylands. She has authored or co-authored 16 books, most recently Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President. Her other publications include Packaging the Presidency; Eloquence in an Electronic Age; Spiral of Cynicism; Presidents Creating the Presidency; and The Obama Victory. She co-edited The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication and The Oxford Handbook of the Science of Science Communication. Jamieson has won university-wide teaching awards at three universities. She is the co-founder of FactCheck.org and its subsidiary site, SciCheck, and director of The Sunnylands Constitution Project, which has produced more than 30 award-winning films on the Constitution for high school students. She is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the American Philosophical Society, the American Academy of Political and Social Science, and the International Communication Association, and a past president of the American Academy of Political and Social Science.
BRANCACCIO: Let’s now assume there are going to be document dumps October 6 and 7 of 2020. What do we do? Is there something, let’s say, radical, we could do? Should a document dump be put into a kind of lockdown for a period of time where grownup journalists can have at it?

JAMIESON: If I could make one change... I would stop the process at the point at which the AP reporter and the first print reporters and the first writers for anything that’s going online ... are beginning to file. And I’d say, “This is now our first story about this. Can we look at every single thing in there and apply every one of those standards [I talked about earlier] including, let’s go back to the texts that we have, and are we sure that this is going to hold up a week from now, a month from now?” Because we have the problem that if we find out we were wrong after the election, we’ve affected an outcome.

And if there’s any doubt, I would lock it up and I would put the best people on it for the longest period of time. It’s problematic when you have thousands and thousands of documents, but in this case the press was narrowing into one block and legitimately so, because Bernie Sanders had called for release of [Hillary Clinton’s paid speeches to financial firms]. There’s a legitimate public interest in knowing what she said in those speeches, so you can say “Of all the things that were dum ped, that’s where I’m going to concentrate my time.” But if they’d applied that, it wouldn’t have been taken out of context in the very first stories. Then the stories that simply cite back to those stories would not have been written, because they would have been back into context, and ... it wouldn’t have gotten to the Sunday shows, it wouldn’t have gotten into the debate.

The reason I’m featuring the debates so heavily is 66-plus million people, and that’s just the direct audience, are exposed. Debates are extraordinarily powerful vehicles and in that environment ... Hillary Clinton looks disingenuous when she responds ... because the pre- sumption of the exchanges [is that] the journalist has accurately cap-sulized it and she’s dissembling, and she already has the perception problem that she is, charitably put, wary. But if you’re adopting a Trump perspective, [she is] a hypocrite and a liar.

JARVIS: Newsworthiness—I’m interested in that in a world of scarcity and abundance. The scarcity used to be our space and our time. What fits on the front page, right? That scarcity is completely gone now. So you can dump anything you want, everything you want.... The scarcity now is the newsroom attention. So I like your test. You decide what to focus on. But does that make a difference in terms of how things are chosen? And then the second part of the question is, do you see evidence that there is self-examination in newsrooms of the sort that you are informing and suggesting and demanding?

JAMIESON: I think there is such a thing as consequential fact. Journalists have plenty of facts, and they have plenty of data, and the judgment that you make about newsworthiness should be in terms of the consequential nature of the information. And in an elec-tion, the way I ask the consequential question is, if a voter believed this and got it wrong would the voter vote differently? And if the answer is yes, that’s really consequential.

And let me take it out of politics for a moment. In the last year we had a measles outbreak across the United States. It’s inexcusable that we had a measles outbreak across the United States. This is something that we should not have any of. There should not be transmission of measles inside the United States, period.

And we know what consequential facts affect people’s decisions to vaccinate. When you’re writing about vaccination, you want to make sure that you have handled it in a way that increases the like-lihood that people understand that, in the risk-benefit relationship, the ratio favors vaccinations so overwhelmingly that, although there are rare side effects, that net individually is toward vaccination, and collectively it is overwhelming towards vaccination.

We just completed a study across the time when there was actu-
ally a measles outbreak ongoing. We took the common tropes that are spread that are misinformation about measles, [which are that] it’s better to get natural immunity from measles than it is to get vaccination, [that] measles cause autism, [that] there are toxins in the measles vaccine. We tracked them across a five-month period in the middle of the measles outbreak. And we found [that] those who across that five-month period were traditional-news-media—reliant were less likely to hold [those tropes] the second time than the first time. Those were social-media—reliant across that time were more likely to hold misinformation. … [If] you know what the consequential fact is, and you know there is a scientific consensus, and you know that there’s a private good and a public good, you may not ethically as a journalist engage in equivalence framing.

I’ve been on this tear about journalists and hacked content from the time my book came out, because I think this is something really tangible and clear with people for whom I have an enormous amount of respect who might, I think, wake up in the morning and work really hard to do the best job that they can under very difficult circumstances. And for about the first year and a half, I think the entire enterprise was in denial, basically. “Oh yeah, the Russians did stuff,” and they’re pointing at the platforms. The troll content on the platforms is highly unlikely to have influenced the outcome. It had an effect on the margin. Focus on the platforms, get the platforms, all the things that need fixing—I support all of that, but please clean your own house up in the process. Then someplace about a year and a half in, it started to change, and I think it started to change because people in the journalistic community started to write pieces. There was a lovely piece in the Columbia Journalism Review, which is highly self-reflective, and went to the editors and asked them questions, and it started to elicit answers that suggested more self-awareness. The question is, what changes have they made in the newsroom? And I don’t expect them to stand up and tell everybody, but I hope that they have.

There’s one more thing and it’s problematic…. We’ve been looking at the tactical framing in journalism going back into the 1970s, the tendency to focus on horse race, on appearance, on who’s ahead in the polls and why. The assumption is if you’re ahead, you must be doing things well. If not, there must be something wrong with you. Money is a surrogate for popularity, et cetera. We actually did a study of this that is the biggest, most expensive study I ever did. We ran the Philadelphia mayoral election across the country in different markets. We exposed people to the actual coverage in our race, which was tactical—who’s ahead, who’s behind. In the middle of those stories, there was issue information.

So we went to our local ABC affiliate, the number-one in the market. We went to the local paper, the Philadelphia Inquirer. We got the same reporters to rewrite the stories from a problem-solution frame—here’s the problem addressing the community, here are the alternative positions. And we had, literally, the people at WPVI put on the same suits with the same ties, do it against the same background. And they helped us rewrite the script. So they basically moved it into journalistically acceptable words.

Now we’re out in the field and we take people who know nothing of our mayoral election. For five days, we give them a half-hour of local news, embedding, in one condition, our tactical coverage, in the other condition, our problem-solution coverage. The morning of that day, they’re given a front page that has our tactical coverage or our solution coverage. So literally for five days we’re mimicking an election for them.

Now here’s what happened … let me just talk about the extremes. Those who had the tactical coverage in print as well as in broadcast across a five-day period are, at the end of that period, less likely to remember any of the issue content that is in both of the conditions. Then we take a debate, an actual debate that our mayoral candidates engaged in, and we edited out all the tactical and strategic questions … and we showed them the clips of the debate, and we tested what they learned out of the debate. These are new issues. Those in the technical condition did not learn the issue coverage in the actual debate, issue-framed at the same level.

So what we said in this book called Spiral of Cynicism, written with Joe Capella, … [is that] what this tactical frame does is activate cynicism and depress learning … and the cynicism activated like this. They said, well, whoever’s elected, they’re not going to keep their promises. And you think about the tactical frame, why should they? Everything about what they were doing with those issues was pan-dering to some constituency, right? So they became cynical. Now some people, when we first published this, said, “But that’s realism. They don’t keep their promises. So you’ve misanalyzed your data.” That was the election that elected Ed Rendell. Ed Randell became a two-term mayor and then became governor, and he kept the majority of his promises. So we had a test in the real world of whether the cynical interpretation was legitimate or not. It wasn’t.

So what happened on the Sunday news shows [in 2016] … the dominant frame was a tactical frame: Hillary Clinton—thrown onto the ropes by release of the speech text. Donald Trump—was it locker room banter? Is this campaign over, as opposed to looking into the substance. If you could just strip that away from those shows—remember, I’m believing that’s activating cynicism, depressing learning—then put in place a careful discussion about how [the candidates] differ on trade, how they differ on banks, how they differ on borders, we might actually have gone into the debate with an electorate armed with a story-based, frame-based, fact-based interpretation of reality that would not be subject to misstatement of factual information.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Do you believe that journalists are being educated to check hacked material, and second part of that, possibly licensing journalists. Do you believe that that would help? Knowing that they know how to use this material that they’re getting from hackers?

JARVIS: Yes. Never enough. We also teach security now, which is part of the awareness that people are going to come after both you and information. I think it’s an excellent question ‘cause I don’t know if we’re doing enough into that analytical question. We are teaching fact-checking. We’re teaching verification, which is a whole new skill now with new jobs. But this kind of analysis doesn’t exist. And your second, I’m glad you raised it because I want to say “No!” No to certifying journalists, because what’s given can be taken away and what’s given officially can be taken away by the officials, and what’s given by the industry will not be given to insurgents. So marketplace of ideas, sorry, but I still believe in it.
BRANCCIO: The White House press corps is accredited by the White House, and they keep getting de-certified by the White House because they don’t like the questions being asked.

JAMIESON: I was asked a question by the New York Times that elicited, for me at least, a surprising amount of controversy. The question was about a video that was edited to make it look as if Nancy Pelosi was tearing up a speech when she wasn’t. And we and the other fact checkers went after it. But the question was the context of it: Shouldn’t the platforms be required to take down things like that? And I said, look, our system doesn’t trust government or corporations to get in the way of candidates’ speech. … [O]ne of the reasons we have access provisions inside the broadcast code is that in the early days of radio, the station owners would say to a candidate, “I don’t like your views, you don’t get your ads on.” So we have actually institutionalized access to the electorate, to candidate speech. Well, I don’t trust those same station owners who didn’t want somebody’s views on to not say, “Okay, we’re gonna take your views, but you’ve got to edit this out and this out and this out, and I’m going to do this.” I just fundamentally want to let the speech alone and create such a robust process that the process takes down and flags the deceptions.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Is there any way that Hillary Clinton could have positively reframed her message following the WikiLeaks dump?

JAMIESON: My perspective is, as best I can, to not think from the perspective of the candidate, but think from the perspective of the electorate. I wanted as an electorate to see those speeches that Bernie Sanders wanted to see, particularly if there were speeches to banks. Now the fact that these weren’t speeches to U.S. banks and were alleged to be, that’s problematic, because that’s a completely different context for the speech.

But as an electorate, I would like to see her have given that content out during the primaries. … Her candidacy, I believe, would have weathered and benefited.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: I think both the media and the electorate have an enormous challenge in this cycle, because we have a president who lies relentlessly, daily, insistently. Is there any hope? Is there any hope that the media will gain a better capacity to fact-check him in real time?

JAMIESON: One of the challenges in an environment in which there are many, many statements that are problematic is which ones do you spend your time on, and it’s the reason for saying consequential deceptions need to get more priority.
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