Dangerous Occupation

The Vulnerabilities of Journalists Covering a Changing World

By Joel Simon

Twenty years ago, most people got their international news from relatively well-established foreign correspondents working for agencies, broadcast outlets, and newspapers. Today, of course, the process of both gathering and disseminating news is more diffuse. This new system has some widely recognized advantages. It democratizes the information-gathering process, allowing participation by more people from different backgrounds and perspectives. It opens the media not only to "citizen journalists" but also to advocacy and civil society organizations including human rights groups that increasingly provide firsthand reporting in war-ravaged societies. New information technologies allow those involved in collecting news to communicate directly with those accessing the information. The sheer volume of people participating in this process challenges authoritarian models of censorship based on hierarchies of control.

But there are also considerable weaknesses. Freelancers, bloggers, and citizen journalists who work with few resources and little or no institutional support are more vulnerable to government repression. Emerging technologies cut both ways, and autocratic governments are developing new systems to monitor and control online speech that are both effective and hard to detect. The direct links created between content producers and consumers make it possible for violent groups to bypass the traditional media and reach the public via chat rooms and websites. Journalists have become less essential and therefore more vulnerable as a result.

▷ American journalist James Foley covering the Syrian civil war, Aleppo, Nov. 5, 2012. *Nicole Tung/Associated Press/ freejamesfoley.org*

Many predicted that the quantity, quality, and fluidity of information would inherently increase as time went on and technology improved, but this has not necessarily been the case. While mass censorship has become more difficult, new and highly effective models of repression have emerged in response to the rapid changes in the way news and information is gathered and delivered.

Statistics indicate that even as information technologies have proliferated, the situation for journalists on the ground has gotten worse, not better. The number of journalists killed and imprisoned around the world has reached record levels in recent years and, according to several studies, press freedom is in decline. At the beginning of December 2012, there were 232 journalists in jail according to Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) research, the highest tally ever recorded. While historically repressive countries like Iran and China contributed to the upsurge in imprisonment, the world's leading jailer of journalists was Turkey, a country with a relatively open media and aspirations to join the European Union. Most of those jailed were being held on anti-state charges, and over half of all journalists in jail around the world worked online, including a majority of those imprisoned in China.

In 2012, seventy-four journalists were killed while carrying out their work; this is close to the record highs recorded at the peak of the Iraq war. The Syrian conflict has proved devastating for the press, with thirty-five journalists killed in a single year. The tally once again reinforced the hybrid nature of frontline newsgathering, with high casualties among both established international media organizations and citizen journalists. Two renowned war correspondents, Marie Colvin of the *Sunday Times* and the French photographer Rémi Ochlik, were killed when their improvised media center in Homs was targeted by Syrian forces in February 2012. In 2014, two American journalists were beheaded by an Islamic extremist faction in Syria. Meanwhile, at least thirteen citizen journalists who reported on the conflict from an activist perspective and provided devastating video images of the carnage and savagery of war also perished, some at the hands of Syrian government snipers.

The leading historical press freedom index compiled by Freedom House, based in Washington, DC, shows that global press freedom has waned in recent years. "After two decades of progress, press freedom is now in decline in almost every part of the world," Freedom House noted in its 2011 Freedom of the Press Index, which tracks the state of media freedom in over 190 countries and has been published since 1980. "Only 15 percent of the world's citizens live in countries that enjoy a free press."

Covering Mexico in the 1990s

How did we get here? Why has it become more dangerous for journalists and other information providers even as technology has made it easier to communicate and access information across borders? The best place to start is to look at the way international correspondents operated twenty years ago, at the dawn of the Internet revolution. While each country and each situation is different, my own experience as a freelance correspondent covering Mexico in the 1990s gives some insight into how the process worked.

Mexico City was a sought-after posting for international reporters, and there were dozens of correspondents representing everyone from the BBC to the American broadcast networks; wire services ranging from the Chinese Xinhua to the Italian ANSA; national dailies like the *Guardian* and *El País*; and local and regional newspapers like the *Baltimore Sun* and the *Sacramento Bee*. We reported the news by interviewing government officials, analysts, and people in the street; we traveled from dusty small towns to the urban slums; we covered the collapse of the Mexican peso and the Zapatista uprising. Nearly all of our reporting was done face to face. Phone interviews were unusual. Most sources did not trust the phones and were reluctant to discuss matters that were remotely sensitive. We sometimes still filed our stories by dictation. We also used fax machines, later modems, and finally e-mail, which was often balky and erratic.

An important part of our job was to read carefully the Mexican press each day (we would watch TV as well, but the national broadcasters at the time were largely mouthpieces for the government). We relied on the Mexican media to track national developments, spot stories and trends, and compare perspectives. Occasionally, an international correspondent would break a major story not covered in the domestic media, but much of our daily coverage was derived from Mexican media reports. When we traveled to a provincial city, we would often seek out a journalist from the local newspaper and ask for a briefing and introductions to officials. Usually such arrangements were informal, but sometimes we hired local reporters as stringers and essentially paid them to be our guides. Some of the reporters who helped us were threatened as a result.

For the most part, the dozens of international journalists based in Mexico City covered the same stories in largely the same way. Foreign editors often asked their correspondents to "match" what the wires were doing or follow up on a particularly compelling story published in a rival publication. Some reporters were more connected and more entrepreneurial than others. Some were better interviewers or more stylish writers. But in the end most of us made a living not necessarily by differentiating our coverage but by tailoring it to local markets. As a freelancer, I always sought new angles and new perspectives, particularly the perspectives of average people, including slum dwellers, small farmers, factory workers, and activists. That kind of reporting took time, which was my competitive advantage since I did not have daily filing deadlines. While the editors were reading the wires, in the pre-Internet era I did not have direct access to the work of my competitors. I learned what my colleagues had been up to at the Friday "cantina night," at which several dozen foreign correspondents would regularly gather. If I wanted to read their stories, I had to go to a local coffee shop called Sanborns that stocked international magazines and newspapers. I spent hours doing this each weekend despite the fact that everything was between a few days and a few weeks out of date.

Like a lot of businesses, freelance journalism was "disrupted" by the Internet. By the end of the decade, the *San Francisco Chronicle* and the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* were no longer in separate markets. When it came to national and international news they were competing not only with each other but also with the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the BBC and any other news website accessible over the Internet. This undermined the value not only of freelancers but also of the full-time correspondents employed by second-tier U.S. newspapers like the *Boston Globe* and *Newsday*. Some of the journalists who worked for these publications were extraordinarily talented, but their positions were expendable once readers were able to use the Internet to obtain easy access to national and international news organizations with more correspondents and more resources. This made closing the bureaus an easy call, particularly as the same technological forces that suddenly forced regional newspapers to compete against one another also ravaged their economic model, with advertising migrating online and circulation plummeting.

The role that international correspondents in Mexico City played as a conduit for the Mexican media also become less essential as interested readers gained the ability to access the websites of local newspapers like *La Jornada* or *Reforma* directly through the Internet. Of course, this was before Google Translate, so Spanish-language skills were required.

The trend of closing and consolidating bureaus in Mexico City accelerated after the 9/11 terror attacks, when news organizations retooled to cover the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Today Mexico remains a vital global story, but there are far fewer international correspondents operating in the country. Those left continue to play a vital role by covering sensitive stories that might be too dangerous for local journalists, particularly on drug trafficking. They are also generally able to report with greater independence and to provide specialized context that make their stories more appealing and accessible to their readers, viewers, and listeners.

While the decline in foreign correspondents in Mexico and in so many other countries around the world is in many ways lamentable, it also must be acknowledged that the Internet exposed some of the inefficiencies of the old structure, in which dozens of reporters filing for different media outlets essentially produced the same story. Certainly, informed and committed observers of Mexico can go online and find infinitely more information than I could access as a correspondent covering the country in the 1990s. Does that mean people are better informed? It depends. If information were apples, then the role of international journalists back in the 1990s was to select the best fruit and "export" them to the international market. Now, using the Internet, international news consumers can buy wholesale. They have access to more information, but they also must sort through it on their own, deciding what is most important

and most useful. What has changed is the marketing and distribution systems. But much of the information about Mexico that the world needs is still produced by local journalists on the ground. Their role in the new international media ecosystem is therefore even more crucial.

Keeping It Local in Iraq

There was another reason that local journalists took on a more direct role in informing the global public, and that was safety. In Iraq, the risk of specific targeted attacks on international journalists become so great that at the height of the violence many well-staffed international bureaus in Baghdad were forced to rely on Iraqi journalists to carry out nearly all street reporting. These reporters became the eyes and ears of the world; they also paid a terrible price in blood.

Initially, the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 was covered almost exclusively by international media. The Iraqi media under Saddam Hussein was one of the most censored and controlled in the world, and there was virtually no independent information inside the country. Seeking to facilitate coverage of the invasion from the perspective of the allied forces, the U.S. military established a program to "embed" journalists with the invading militaries. The idea was to give reporters frontline access to the combat operations but also to manage coverage of the war. In addition to the thousands of embedded journalists, several hundred "unilateral" reporters converged independently in Baghdad. They clustered in high-end hotels, like the Hamra and the Palestine. The Iraqi government tolerated them because it wanted journalists in Baghdad to help get its message of resistance and defiance out to the world. It also wanted Western journalists on the scene to document the collateral damage from U.S. bombs. International journalists were accompanied everywhere by Iraqi government minders.

As the Saddam Hussein regime disintegrated, the system of minders and controls began to break down, and the journalists began to slip away. The two sets of reporters—the embeds who accompanied the U.S. military and the unilaterals who covered the war from Baghdad—converged on Firdos Square, just outside the Palestine Hotel, as the U.S. Marines rode triumphantly into Baghdad. But the concentration of international media did not necessarily produce an accurate portrait of events. The actions of the Marines and journalists on the ground in Firdos Square, amplified by editors in newsrooms in the United States, turned what was a relatively minor and ambiguous moment in the conflict, the toppling of the statue of Saddam Hussein, into a triumphalist image, according to an account by the journalist Peter Maass published in the *New Yorker*.

In the immediate aftermath of Saddam's fall, international news organizations moved to a system of bureaus, and journalists began to operate freely. During this brief period, they moved about the entire country, delving into areas of Iraqi life

previously unexplored. "We entered Iraq during a fleeting golden age of modern war time journalism," recalled the *Washington Post* reporter Rajiv Chandrasekaran, who established the newspaper's bureau in Baghdad in April 2003. "In the early weeks and months there were minimal security threats. You could put fuel in the tank, find a willing driver, and go anywhere. The biggest risk was getting into a car accident or being invited into someone's home and served tea, since drinking water was pumped directly from the Tigris. Journalists were seen as neutral, sympathetic figures and people were anxious to engage with us."

But there were ominous signs. On July 5, 2003, an Iraqi gunman approached the 24-year old British freelance cameraman Richard Wild and shot him in the head as he was reporting outside Baghdad's natural history museum. The circumstances remain murky—it was unclear whether Wild was carrying a camera or whether he was working on a story about looting—and journalists in Baghdad paid the incident little heed, seeing it as just a random act.

But as the conflict intensified, so did violent attacks on the media. As Internet access expanded rapidly in Iraq, insurgent groups developed their own online information networks, relying on websites and local and regional news outlets to communicate externally and on chat rooms to engage with their supporters. These groups had little interest in influencing international public opinion but had a strong interest in disrupting the emerging civil society and consolidation of the American-backed government. Attacking journalists was an effective method for achieving this goal.

As journalists were kidnapped and in some cases executed, bureaus added fortifications, and journalists were forced to move around in armored vehicles accompanied in many cases by armed guards. "In mid-2004, as Al-Qaeda elements began taking over leadership of the insurgency from the nationalist good old boys of the Baath party, things changed dramatically," Chandrasekaran recalled. "Journalists were no longer seen as neutral actors and people to talk to. Instead, they were people to apprehend and kidnap. The tenor of the interviews changed among those Iraqis not supportive of the American presence. People were less interested in talking, and harder to get a hold of. The interviews were far more uneasy. Journalists stopped talking to those people."

Because Western reporters could only move around in carefully planned operations, Iraqi reporters—many of whom were initially hired as translators and fixers—took over many of the frontline reporting activities. Unlike Westerners, they could disappear into the crowd, particularly at the scene of suicide attacks. When they went home, Iraqi journalists did their best to keep their profession a secret. But there were casualties. On September 19, 2005, the *New York Times* reporter Fakher Haider was seized from his home in the southern Iraqi city of Basra by men claiming to be police officers. His body, with a gunshot wound to the head, was recovered the

next day. On December 12, 2006, the Associated Press cameraman Aswan Ahmed Lutfallah was shot dead by an insurgent who spotted him filming clashes in Mosul.

The increased dependence by international media organizations on local Iraqis to carry out frontline reporting created challenges with the U.S. military, which was often suspicious of Iraqis carrying cameras since the insurgents often sought to document their attacks. Accredited Iraqi reporters were regularly detained and accused of having ties to terrorists. Some were held for extended periods.

The violent censorship of the media carried out primarily by insurgent groups and sectarian militias had a devastating effect on the quality and quantity of information coming out of Iraq. Reporting on the nature and structure of militant and sectarian groups, their relationship to government security forces, the role of Iran in the insurgency, and the scope of government corruption were all vital—and underreported—stories. Despite the vast resources invested in covering Iraq, the strategy of imposing censorship through violence was extremely effective. More than 150 journalists and fifty-four media support workers were killed during the Iraq war, the highest number ever documented in a single conflict. Eighty-five percent of them were Iraqis.

The Pearl Killing

Between 2002 and 2012, 506 journalists were killed, according to CPJ data, compared to 390 in the previous decade. One factor contributing to the increase was that during this period journalists became regular victims of terrorist violence, including murders and kidnappings.

The new wave of terror attacks on the media began with the murder of the *Wall Street Journal* correspondent Daniel Pearl, killed in Pakistan in February 2002. The decision by Al-Qaeda operative Khalid Sheikh Mohammed to murder Pearl was apparently based on several factors, none of which appear to have been considered carefully. First, Pearl's murder was a way of demonstrating ruthlessness and resolve in the face of the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan that had toppled the Taliban government, devastated Al-Qaeda's terrorist infrastructure, and taken a considerable toll on the organization's leadership. Mohammed later told interrogators at Guantánamo, where he is now being held after being captured in Pakistan in March 1, 2003, that Pearl's Jewishness was "convenient" but was not the motive for his abduction or murder.

Based on the gruesome video made of Pearl's killing—which was actually a reenactment because the video camera failed on the first take—Mohammed clearly saw the murder as a recruiting tool that he hoped would inspire Al-Qaeda followers. It certainly sent a message of contempt for Western public opinion and to the journalists who helped shape it.

For Al-Qaeda's followers Pearl's murder sent a message: international journalists were legitimate targets of terror operations, and the goal should be to maximize media attention of such abductions. The fact that the Pearl murder may have stemmed from the impulsive actions of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed rather than official Al-Qaeda policy no longer mattered. Targeted attacks on the media carried out by militants either linked to or inspired by Al-Qaeda multiplied, and this in turn had a profound effect on the ability of journalists to report the news from parts of the world where the group maintains a presence. In many instances, the implied sanction conferred by Pearl's murder provided a modicum of a religious justification for what was essentially a criminal enterprise, kidnapping for ransom.

Pearl's killing also sent a clear message that in the Internet era there were other ways to communicate and that traditional journalists were dispensable, useful primarily as hostages and props in elaborately staged videos designed to convey a message of terror to the world.

A decade later, such dangers to journalists were dramatically evident in Syria. In 2013 and 2014 as the hardline Islamist factions of the Syrian rebels gained the upper hand, journalists became specific targets. During this period numerous journalists were among the Westerners and Arabs kidnapped by the group known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Two American freelancers were beheaded in murders videotaped and posted on the Internet: James Foley, who worked for *GlobalPost* and Agence France-Presse, and Steven Sotloff, who wrote for various publications including *TIME* magazine.

From Curated Search to Social Media

When I was a freelancer covering Mexico and Latin America, international news was "curated." This meant that if you were a news consumer outside the country, you had to rely on the judgment of the journalists on the ground and the editors who selected what stories to publish to stay informed. By the time the second Iraq war rolled around, people got their news in a different way: search. Yes, they might read their local paper or watch the news from the BBC or CNN, but if they got interested in a particular story, they could use Google to dig deeper. A few keystrokes would direct them to the most detailed coverage of a specific incident or to an investigation or analyses that shed light on a certain aspect of the story.

By the time the Arab revolts broke out in December 2010 a new method of following international news had emerged: social media. Again, many people around the world watched the events unfold on television or read about them in their local newspapers. And as during the Iraq war, they used search engines to dig deeper. But social media—notably Twitter and Facebook—became the most efficient way to

follow developments minute by minute and gain access not only to the perspectives of journalists but also eyewitnesses and informed observers. I followed developments in Egypt while sitting in my office in New York. I streamed Al-Jazeera on my desktop while simultaneously monitoring Twitter. I followed the feeds of journalists that I knew were present in Tahrir Square. Their tweets led to bloggers and activists who were also on the scene. I was generally aware of every major development within minutes. Even though news websites were updated perhaps hourly, I turned to them the way people used to read weeklies like *TIME* or *Newsweek*—not for breaking news but for context and analysis.

The evolution from curated to search to social media is tracked by Ethan Zuckerman in his 2013 book *Rewire: Digital Cosmopolitans in the Age of Connection*. One of the great benefits of using social media to share news is that it provides a forum for local journalists to bring specific stories and issues to the attention of a global audience. Plus, the same channels used to spread the news can also be used to defend the rights of the reporter who is subsequently threatened or put under pressure. Take the case of the Liberian journalist Mae Azango. In March 2012, Azango published a story entitled "Growing Pains: Sande Tradition of Genital Cutting Threatens Liberian Women's Health" in *Front Page Africa*, a Liberian newspaper that also serves the large community of exiles through its active website. The story blew the lid off a taboo subject in Liberia, female genital cutting. The practice is carried out by the secret Sande society, which is also a powerful political force in Liberia, particularly at election time. This is why the country's Nobel Prize–winning president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was reluctant to stand up to the Sande and tackle the issue of cutting, which is practiced on an estimated 60 percent of Liberian girls. In her report, Azango interviewed a woman who described being held down by five women while her clitoris was cut out with an unsterilized knife. The account was brutal and shocking. Azango chronicled the health risks and social consequences of the practice, interviewing medical professionals. The story sparked a fierce debate in Liberia and in the exile community. But it also put Azango at risk. Death threats poured in, forcing Azango and her daughter into hiding.

Neither Azango's original report nor the threats against her were covered by traditional media. What gave the story life were social media networks that helped spread the word. Once the threats emerged, this same network was mobilized. Eventually, the *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof took up Azango's case and used his Twitter feed, which has over one million followers, to draw international attention that led to action. President Sirleaf, who had responded with seeming indifference, eventually agreed to provide physical protection for Azango. As a result of the international attention, she also took steps to challenge the Sande, and her government imposed a temporary ban on genital cutting while it studied the issue.

While social media has had a profound effect on news consumers and journalists, it has also changed the way governments manage information. Activists celebrated when the effort of Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak to control information during the Tahrir Square revolt failed, and he was eventually toppled. But governments around the world learned a different lesson from those events. Recognizing the threat posed by new information networks, they began cracking down on online speech. While some countries seek to hide their repressive policies beyond a façade of democracy, China is quite public about its efforts and takes pride in its ability to monitor and censor information online—and no wonder. With more than 564 million Internet users at the end of 2012, China has more people online than any other country. Many are highly active on social media.

The Chinese government has developed strategies combining traditional forms of repression with high-tech techniques, like using software to filter out prohibited content. Newsgatherers in China face myriad restrictions. Foreign reporters are often unable to obtain visas to enter the country, and those based in China are sometimes blocked from traveling to certain areas, notably Tibet. Photographers often find their work obstructed by security forces, particularly when documenting demonstrations. Chinese employees of international newsgathering operations face constant monitoring and government pressure. International human rights organizations are for the most part unable to operate inside mainland China. Meanwhile, Chinese journalists working for the domestic media must follow regular government directives on what to cover and not cover. Failure to follow these guidelines is likely to result in dismissal or worse.

While dissident journalists in China face the possibility of arrest and imprisonment, CPJ research suggests that the number of journalists imprisoned has not increased in recent years and stood at thirty-two at the end of 2012. Given the size of China's population—and the size of its press corps—imprisonment is clearly not the preferred strategy. In fact, most of those imprisoned are not traditional journalists but online dissidents and activists who straddle the line between journalism and activism.

The real threat as China sees it is the way in which the growing number of people who use social media share information and links. The program of domestic monitoring—using electronic surveillance and tens of thousands of paid government supporters who patrol chat rooms and read posts—has been expanded. Filtering has become more pervasive and effective. But China's ultimate goal is to transform the current structure of the Internet, converting it from a decentralized global system to one in which national governments exercise effective control. If China succeeds in its efforts, the Internet as we know it would come to an end.

Quality Control

The ability of governments to manage, control, and manipulate information undermines the creation of a global civic culture and shields powerful institutions from public accountability. When Pakistan's government suppresses coverage of its military and intelligence operations, when China censors reports about food safety, and when Syria completely blocks access to international reporters, they are not only censoring within their own national borders. They are censoring news and information critical to people in many parts of the world. Without adequate information, global citizens are essentially disempowered. While the right of people everywhere to "seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers" is enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international legal instruments, the reality is that there are few effective means to fight back against censorship on an international level.

While the lack of institutional and legal protections is troubling, it is hardly surprising that governments would seek to censor and control information. But what happens if the media itself is doing the censoring? This is unquestionably a significant issue. In many countries around the world, the media is not independent. It is partisan, biased, corrupt, and irresponsible. It is beholden to powerful corporate interests, in some cases governments, in other cases opposition forces. While the quality of information clearly matters, the imperative in the current environment is to ensure that information of all kinds continues to flow within national boundaries and across borders. Governments, militants, and other enemies of freedom of expression cannot be allowed to restrict the flow of international news.

Poor media performance, while lamentable, is not a violation of international law. Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights guarantees the right of all people to express their ideas and prevents governments from prohibiting their expression. It does not guarantee that the ideas ultimately expressed will be thoughtful, considered, or responsible.

Clearly, journalists and media organizations should produce ethical, responsible journalism that serves the public interest. This is always the goal. But based on my experience as the executive director of the Committee to Protect Journalists, I am reluctant to combine the defense of freedom of expression with a discussion of strategies for improving the quality of information. This is because too often I have seen governments justify restrictions on freedom of expression or the press by arguing that certain kinds of information are harmful or destabilizing or that the media is biased, irresponsible, or beholden to "foreign" interests. I remember a debate with the Venezuelan ambassador to the United States, who argued that his government should use its authority to ensure that all news presented to the public was "truthful." One

can acknowledge that the performance of the Venezuelan media has at times been woeful while still recognizing that this is a terrible idea.

I can remember another meeting I had with the interior minister of the Gambia, a tiny sliver of a country in West Africa where journalists have faced persecution and restrictions. He argued that government intervention was necessary because the Gambian media was reckless and irresponsible. My counterargument is that the media is generally no more biased, underdeveloped, or polarized than the rest of the society and that expecting the media to rise above all other institutions is unrealistic and unfair. Journalists everywhere too often fail in their responsibility to inform the public, to hold governments to account, and always to seek the truth. But such failures should never be used to justify legal action, control, or censorship.

There are of course legitimate limits on freedom of expression in an international and domestic context. Incitement to violence is never protected, there must be legal redress available for libel and slander, and governments may take certain legally prescribed measures to limit speech to safeguard national security. There are also valid critiques of the media in nearly every country in the world. The U.S. media is dominated by corporate interests. The British media is distorted by invasive and scandal-mongering tabloids. Elements of the Pakistani media are infiltrated by state security agencies. The Turkish media is dominated by business interests beholden to the government. The Mexican media has been partially corrupted by trafficking organizations. Governments can help address these issues by supporting media development and investing in journalism education; they can take steps to end cronyism and break up monopolies. But a prerequisite for any government efforts to improve the quality of information available to the public must be a clear and unequivocal embrace of the full range of freedom of expression guaranteed under international law. Without such a commitment, governments in my experience that point to the media's shortcomings are looking to exploit them to justify restrictions rather than to ensure that people have access to timely and accurate information. Under international law, governments do not have the authority to restrict information because it is "biased," "false," or offensive, disruptive, or destabilizing. This is the essence of free expression.

Informing the World

Technology has transformed the way that news is disseminated and consumed around the world. But we still need people on the ground in places where news is breaking out for the system as it is now structured to work effectively. There has been much excitement about the roles that citizen journalists and activists have played in providing firsthand accounts of unfolding events in Egypt, Iran, Syria, and China. That excitement is understandable. But for the moment the most important (and least heralded)

figures in the global information ecosystem are local journalists working in their own countries. Partly as a result of their increased visibility and importance, local journalists are more vulnerable than ever. They are the ones informing global citizens—and they are ones being jailed and killed in record numbers.

The flow of information is undoubtedly increasing, and today because of the ubiquitous nature of social media we are often inundated and often unable to process it or put it into proper context. In fact, the volume of information can even obscure what we don't know and prevent us from seeing the ways that governments and violent forces are disrupting the flow of news within countries and across borders. Deluged with data, we are blind to the larger reality. Around the world new systems of information control are taking hold. They are stifling the global conversation and impeding the development of policies and solutions based on an informed understanding of the local realities. Repression and violence against journalists is at record levels, and press freedom is in decline.