

[...] I myself
create it,
edit it,
censor it,
publish it,
distribute it,
and get imprisoned
for it. [...]¹

—Vladimir Bukovsky

People working in the new environment of citizen journalism are uniquely vulnerable, not having the backing of traditional media organizations. It is up to us, as a sector, to advocate for their safety and “defend the medium on which we’ve all become dependent”: the Internet.

Embedded in Chaos: Journalism in 2012 *A Conversation with* **Joel Simon**

Editors’ note: In January, the Nonprofit Quarterly’s editor in chief, Ruth McCambridge, sat down with Joel Simon, executive director of the Committee to Protect Journalists, to discuss that organization’s role in shielding journalists. What we heard from Simon was not only a description of this brilliant collective effort of journalists to protect those in danger of imprisonment or death, but also a powerful discussion of the shifts occurring in journalism and in the ranks and vulnerabilities of those acting as journalists. Journalism is, of course, central to a healthy, engaged democracy, and it is more and more often seated in a nonprofit organization or even pursued by individuals unattached to any formal institution.





"JOURNALISTS PHOTOGRAPH LIBYAN REBELS AS THEY FIRE ON GOVERNMENT TROOPS" © JOHN MOORE/GETTY IMAGES



Nonprofit Quarterly: At NPQ we've been covering journalism—and exploring the intersection between journalism and nonprofits in terms of being vital parts of civil society—for a while now. And what we've tried to do before, and what we want to do now, is alert nonprofits to their responsibility toward journalism and their dependence on it. We would like to talk with you a little about the morphing of journalism sites—how that whole landscape is changing, and what it might mean for the protection of journalism and journalists. But first, could you describe the committee and the critical role it plays in protecting journalists?

Joel Simon: We just celebrated our thirtieth year. CPJ was established in 1981, and we have a founding/creation myth of sorts, if you will. . . . In 1980, a journalist from Paraguay named Alcibiades González Delvalle was on a one-month U.S. State Department exchange trip. González had written some critical columns about the Stroessner dictatorship, and one week into his visit to the United States he learned that a warrant had been issued for his arrest in Paraguay. It was probably an attempt by the government to keep him in exile. González alerted journalists in the U.S. to his situation, but it appeared there was no group in existence that was prepared to step up and defend him. But there were a couple of journalists—Michael Massing, who was executive editor

of the *Columbia Journalism Review*, and Laurie Nadel, a writer at CBS News—who got wind of the story and notified friends and the media, and asked them to cover it. The story was written before González even got on the plane, and on arrival in Paraguay the authorities let him clear customs. But the next day he was arrested while getting into a taxi, and at that point the network Michael and Laurie had established mobilized, and there was a series of stories and denunciations. And, lo and behold, the Stroessner government, which was sensitive to international criticism, reacted, and eventually González was freed.

And, from that one case, a model was born that seems today to be widely accepted but that at the time was something of an unusual viewpoint, which was that journalists, particularly journalists working in places where they don't face repression and persecution and violence, have an obligation to stand up for their colleagues around the world and to use the tools of journalism to achieve that. And, that's what we do today, except we do it on a much larger scale. We have about thirty employees, including an expanding network of consultants and representatives all over the world. We have a large and involved board of directors who help amplify all the work that we do. But we remain committed to those same founding principles, which is to use the tools of journalism to ensure that all journalists everywhere are able to do their jobs freely without fear of reprisal.

NPQ: Do you see any particular trends playing out around the world with respect to the dangers posed to journalists?

JS: First I would like to say that, throughout its history, CPJ has always had a fairly flexible definition of what constitutes journalism. We don't have a rigid kind of box that we try to put everything in. We use common sense. We use our experience. We judge things contextually. So, we've always broadly defended the rights of people everywhere to report news and information through whatever means and to disseminate opinions grounded in factual analysis.

NPQ: Can you give some examples?

JS: We defended the journalists in the Soviet Union who used samizdat; and apparently (I wasn't here at the time) there was a discussion that led to the organization's getting involved with the Tiananmen Square wall posters issue because, in that moment in China, that was the only way to disseminate the ideas publicly. And in the view of the staff at the time, it was a form of journalism.

We've never said that you have to have a press card or you have to be employed full-time by an established media organization to be a journalist; we've always seen journalism as an activity. And so we've made the transition pretty seamlessly to the new reality of journalism—particularly international journalism—that has been transformed by technology. And in many ways it's a much more democratic exercise, because people can now use these new technologies to engage in journalism on their own. They can use social media. Sometimes it's rather informal. Sometimes there are just individual blogs. And the obvious ascendancy of this new form of media has occurred at a time when traditional forms of media, particularly large international media operations, are cutting back—have fewer foreign correspondents.

So, we live now in an environment in which both forms of journalism coexist and are necessary and supplement each other. It's not either/or; it's both. We need both: we need traditional media operations, and we need the information they provide to be supplemented by new forms of journalism. But what we're seeing is that the people who work in this new environment are uniquely vulnerable, because, while the technology may be harder to control if you've got many, many people witnessing events and uploading videos on the web, the individuals themselves are extremely vulnerable because they don't have some media organization backing them. They don't have institutional support. And we're seeing this in terms of the number of journalists who are in prison around the world. Half of journalists currently in prison around the world were working online. That's been a consistent trend over the last few years, which was reinforced this past year. The increasing numbers of journalists killed are online reporters. The past year was the second year in a row that we've seen an increase in that number.

NPQ: *And, when you say online, the implication is that they're also relatively less protected?*

JS: Absolutely. So, that's where we feel our role is critical, because, while we continue to defend in the way that we always have the work of traditional journalists, we've become increasingly involved with protecting this new generation of journalists. And there are two facets: One is you have to protect their physical integrity, defend them when they're jailed, advocate for justice if they're attacked, provide support, sometimes evacuation, medical treatment . . . whatever you need to do to ensure that this new generation of journalists are able to carry out their work. The other thing you need to do is to defend the medium on which we've all become dependent, and that's the Internet itself. That technology has become the essential platform for journalism, and you cannot have a free press nor can you *envision* a free press in the future without a free and open Internet. So we've incorporated that into our advocacy, and that's become a growing focus of our work.

NPQ: *So you're seeing an increasing number of people who are relatively unprotected because they're not backed by major media organizations and they're working more as individuals or with small groups. Are there other kinds of trends that you're noticing?*

JS: I think what really surprised us this past year was the dramatic increase in the number of journalists in jail around the world and how much the role that the Arab Spring and journalism, both new and traditional forms, played in keeping the events perpetually front and center on a global scale. Traditional forms of journalism are crucial in terms of reaching large audiences. You still need that. It's still critical in terms of reaching large and, particularly, global audiences. Then you have citizen/informal journalists with the ability to observe events as they unfold and provide that information. And the power that those two combined forces had in fueling and maintaining the momentum that led to the uprising throughout the Arab world—well, repressive governments have taken notice.

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And so what we're actually seeing is a growing crackdown in response to that, particularly to online speech. We're seeing that in China, where there was this pervasive fear on the part of the government that there was going to be what some dissidents and activists had dubbed a "Jasmine Revolution." And, of course, the Chinese government responded aggressively to this possibility, which was, as far as we can determine, remote. But they took very aggressive action to curtail the development of this kind of critical speech online. And then you've got a country like Iran. . . . Everyone points to the success of these new media technologies in fostering uprisings and revolts, but, of course, that's not the story of Iran. In Iran, the government successfully suppressed this emerging information society and has once again regained control of the information sphere there, and that means that the protests have been crushed.

So, those are the trends we're seeing. We're seeing a powerful new force emerging globally and within societies that have sought, if they're not closed, to be able at least to maintain control over information and how it's utilized within the society. We're seeing the power of that, but we're also seeing that governments that are threatened by these new developments are taking very aggressive, very repressive action, and that's led to a spike in the number of journalists in prison around the world and also an increase in repression in many countries.

NPQ: *Let's turn to this country for a moment and talk about the number of arrests related to the OWS protests around the country. What was your take on that?*

JS: I should point out that our focus is global, and so we only tend to get involved in situations in the United States when there's a considerable level of violence and/or repression, and we definitely took a position on the arrests related to the OWS protests. But the phenomena that I was describing happening outside the U.S. are exactly what we saw in the coverage of Occupy Wall Street. Who was out there? It was a mix of bloggers and people using social media along with professional journalists, and when the authorities decided to

move in, and tried to take control of this space, they had a very hard time distinguishing between these groups or even responding in a way that recognized the role of the people who were gathering and disseminating information of interest and relevance to the public—whether or not they had credentials hanging around their necks.

And, that's what we saw. There were large numbers of arrests, and we were very troubled by that. I don't mean to suggest that it compares in any way with what happened in Tahrir Square or in Tunisia or in Bahrain or in lots of other places around the world, but the phenomenon is the same, which is this new sort of information space in which it's not just professional reporters who are out there but also people who are doing journalism on a more informal basis. And that mix creates challenges, and it creates an environment in which authorities, certainly in this case, overreact, and I think we've seen that the press and free-speech community in this country has responded pretty strongly to that.

NPQ: *We were at the Boston Occupy site the night they were expecting to be raided. That didn't end up happening until the following night, but we did see numerous young people walking around with pieces of paper on their backs that said, "Press," and we wondered, how is this going to play out? If the police did decide to move in, how would they view that? It presents an interesting situation. . . .*

JS: And, just extrapolating from what we're seeing in terms of the coverage of Occupy Wall Street and via a much more segmented media market, anyone can take what they're seeing and disseminate it through social media and other forms, and they have a targeted audience. But I was talking to a veteran war correspondent recently who covered Libya, and I was saying, okay, you've been doing this for a long time. When you were out there covering a war thirty years ago, who were your colleagues? And they were pretty much all professional journalists working for established media outlets. Some on a freelance basis, but pretty much everyone had some sort of assignment or they wouldn't be out there, and they had

some media organization behind them—maybe not fully committed to them, because they were freelancers, but still, they weren't completely on their own. And Libya was a real mix. There were people out there who were experienced, but there were young people with iPhones, too. And, that's the reality. Wherever there's a big story now, whether it's Occupy Wall Street or the front lines in Libya, you get this mix of people.

NPQ: *So characterize that shift for us. What do you think it means on a larger kind of civil society level?*

JS: We're still sorting it out. There are a lot of people out there trying to fit this into some neat paradigm, i.e., we've suffered a grave loss because there are fewer professional journalists out there covering conflict, and so we're less informed. I don't buy it. There are other people who say that with the advent of social media and crowdsourcing and new technologies, this is the new way that information is being disseminated, and the traditional forms of journalism are irrelevant. I don't buy that either. We're living in a transition period, where both forms of journalism operate side by side and interact with one another, but what's totally clear is that the journalism space is now open. Almost anyone can get into it.

NPQ: *What an extraordinary moment this is. . . .*

JS: What's amazing to me are civil society groups, including, for example, human rights groups, documenting human rights violations as they occur in real time. I consider that a form of journalism. Yes, they're doing it because they have some broader purpose, which is to defend human rights, but I don't see a meaningful distinction between that and the role that journalists have traditionally performed. So, we're living in an environment in which the traditional role that journalists have played is still very valid and still very important and still very useful, but they're having to share the space, not only with individuals and citizen journalists and what have you, but with civil society groups, too, using journalism to achieve their larger goals.

NPQ: *It's still in such a turbulent state. . . .*

JS: But it's exciting.

NPQ: *Absolutely. So, let us just ask you about investigative journalism. . . . The really long-term, dig down deep kind needs to be supported by someone. What is going on there, and what do we need to pay attention to?*

JS: When you look at this new reality there is a certain kind of journalism, a sort of eyewitness journalism, that the new technology unquestionably benefits. In other words, the ability of people to observe and transmit their observations is so much easier now. You don't have to be a journalist and run around and find people who saw something, and then make sure they actually saw what they said they saw. You can look at five cell phone videos that have been uploaded, and maybe talk to one or two people and confirm that information, and feel pretty confident that the reality that you're describing is what actually occurred. But investigative journalism is a different animal, because many of the skills needed to carry out effective investigative journalism take years to acquire and huge amounts of experience to master, and these projects take an enormous amount of time. Yes, it's true that it's much easier now than it has ever been to get your hands on documents because of these technologies. But putting it all together, and putting it in context, and explaining it, and then disseminating it to a large audience? That takes significant resources, and there are fewer resources available to do it. So that's why it is so vital that nonprofits have emerged to fulfill this role, because I think that it would be very hard to sustain otherwise. So, that's certainly a positive development, but it's a response to a situation in which traditional investigative journalism is in jeopardy.

NPQ: *If you were to look forward five years, what would you expect the landscape to look like?*

JS: The rate of change is so dramatic that it's very, very hard to predict. Technology is going to continue to transform the way that news and

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information is disseminated. I'm looking at it very much from a global perspective. I think there's going to be more and more information available. The question is, will there be a structure that makes it financially viable for people who do this kind of work to get a salary? And will there be a structure that ensures the information reaches the largest possible audience, or will it continue to segment and fragment in a way that doesn't necessarily encourage collective understanding? Those are the questions. But I think the underlying principle, and the one that gives me faith, if you will—and I really believe this—is that the desire both to receive and disseminate information is inherent in our humanity. It's an essential component of any society. It's the way that human beings relate to one another. So this is a deeply embedded impulse that, ultimately, I don't think can be suppressed, and the demand is so powerful that one way or another it will continue to be met.

NPQ: *With respect to Time Magazine's Year of the Protester (the Protester being Time's Person of the Year), how does the dynamic that you see occurring around the world—with people deciding, Okay, we've had it, we're taking to the streets—intersect with what you see happening in journalism?*

JS: There's a direct relationship. One is, around the world, the demands that street protesters often have—especially when they're young people—is to be able to participate in this new world in which information is free, and to be able to access the information that they care about, and to be able to communicate with like-minded people. And attempts by governments to restrict participation in this new global culture are often one of the things that inspire these protests. So, the access to information and participation in this new global culture of information sharing is often one of the key demands of the protesters. And the other thing is that the protests themselves are obviously facilitated by the use of these new communications technologies, which help to fulfill basic organizational needs but also allow people to share information about newsworthy events that might inspire them to get out and protest.

Whether a terrible abuse committed by their government or evidence of voting fraud or evidence of corruption, it's much easier to share that information. And then, finally, journalists and social media—and this whole new kind of information environment—make it possible for the demands of the protesters to be communicated to a broader segment of the society, and then the people who become aware of the grievances of the protesters identify with them, and that creates the broader social movement. That process is also facilitated by these new technologies. So, we live in an environment, if you will, in which if certain conditions are met there's plenty of oxygen. The information is the oxygen that fuels these protests. The flip side is governments are very aware of this. It's obvious to me but it's also obvious to governments, and so they're taking efforts to ensure that these information flows are disrupted and that the oxygen that sustains these protests is not readily available.

NPQ: *So what do you see right now in terms of what's going on in the nonprofit sector with respect to holding entities that view their work as journalism? And what's going on in the for-profit sector? What do you think is the trend there? Are we likely to see more and more investigative journalism held in the nonprofit sector, and how fast do you think that's moving?*

JS: That's very hard to answer. It's kind of linked to the earlier question about what are the new models that are going to emerge and will those models be able to generate the financial resources to sustain investigative reporting. And, if that happens, we could see investigative reporting move back into—at least in this country—the traditional for-profit journalism. We could see more of it there. But, it's sort of being warehoused, and, you know, there's a lot of excitement about nonprofit entities like ProPublica and Center for Public Integrity, and obviously they're doing hugely important work. The question is, is it a transitional arrangement, or is it a permanent one? Is this where investigative journalism will reside indefinitely, or is this where it will reside until new models emerge? And that's a question that I'm not in a position to answer.



NPQ: *You look at the amounts of money that it's requiring, and you know the faddishness of philanthropy. . . .*

JS: It's vitally important, obviously, because a generation of investigative reporters could disappear if there aren't ways to sustain them. But, yes, I think the question is, how long will this arrangement need to go on, or should we expect this to be the new model?

NPQ: *If you could urge people to action in the nonprofit sector, what would you say to them?*

JS: Consider the role of information in everything you do, and consider your dependence on your ability to function in that information-rich environment, and imagine what would happen if you did not have access to the information you needed—which, of course, is the environment in which many nonprofits and civil society groups operate in many parts of the world. So, I think the key thing to keep in mind is that, particularly in the globalized world in which we live,

information is absolutely vital. It is sort of the currency. I think the question to consider is, do you have access to the information that's necessary for you to make informed decisions? And, if you don't, why don't you? And are you able to fully participate in using the resources available to disseminate information to the people you are trying to reach? I think those are the questions that nonprofits—and individuals—need to ask themselves. This is an era in which information is as critical as it's ever been, and the hybrid structures that have emerged to provide it are varied—which is a good thing—but in many ways they're also vulnerable.

NOTE

1. *Samizdat*, as defined by Vladimir Bukovsky, Russian dissident and author. *Samizdat* was the term used in the post-Stalin USSR for self-published, self-distributed publications censored by the state.

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