

## ISOJ 2023: Day 2

### Panel: *Exile journalism: Forced out of their countries, journalists use technology to report from abroad and have impact back home*

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Chair: [Kathleen McElroy](#), professor, School of Journalism and Media, UT Austin

- [Olga Churakova](#), independent journalist and podcast host, “Hi, You’re a Foreign Agent” (Russia)
  - [Carlos Fernando Chamorro](#), founder and editor, *Confidencial* (Nicaragua)
  - [Danny Fenster](#), editor-at-large, *Frontier Myanmar* (Myanmar)
  - [Juan Luis Font](#), journalist and radio host, *ConCriterio* (Guatemala)
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**Kathleen McElroy** As you know, the title of this, as Mallery was telling us, is *Exile Journalism*, and here is the SEO part, *Forced out of their country, journalists use technology to report from abroad and have impact back home*. That pretty much covers it. But before I get into this, I do want to say we're going to be respectful of their reporting techniques. We're not going to get too specific to protect their journalists back home and their consumers. So even in the Q&A, if you could refrain from asking specifically what they're doing in certain circumstances because I'm telling them they shouldn't tell you. OK. Because this is the international symposium on online journalism, you all know how dangerous it is to be a journalist. Here in the U.S., a Las Vegas journalist was slain because of his reporting, and currently, a *Wall Street Journal* journalist is wrongfully detained in Russia. These cases receive a lot of coverage here in the U.S., and it demonstrates just how relatively safe, though difficult and discouraging, it can be to do journalism here in the U.S. It's not that way outside of our borders. It is very dangerous to be a journalist in Mexico, in Russia, all over the world, literally. You can be detained. Your publication can be shut down. You can be killed.

Here we have four very brave journalists who are still committed to journalism in their home countries, even though they can no longer live there. Going in alphabetical order, we have Carlos Chamorro, who is the founder and editor of *Confidencial* in Nicaragua; Olga Churakova, an independent journalist and podcast host “Hi. You’re a Foreign Agent”, and she'll tell us about that; Danny Fenster, an editor at large at *Frontier Myanmar*; and Juan Luis Font, a journalist and radio host with *ConCriterio* — sorry about that — in Guatemala. They should be telling the stories, so we're just going to let them get started. If you could come up here, Carlos, and give us your story. They will each spend some time telling their stories.

**Carlos Fernando Chamorro** Our story in Nicaragua is very similar to what we heard yesterday from Afghanistan, from Turkey, from Cambodia and other countries. I'll try to summarize some of our lessons we have learned reporting from exile, but I believe we have to learn a lot from each other.

On February 15 of this year, 94 Nicaraguan citizens were stripped of our nationality by the dictatorship of Daniel Ortega. It was an illegal and unconstitutional act in violation of international treaties signed by Nicaragua. The list of 94 includes 11 journalists, directors of exiled media outlets such as myself and *Confidencial*, my colleagues who are here

today with us. Six days earlier on February 9 another 222 people, all political prisoners, were released from prison, deported to the United States and also stripped of their Nicaraguan nationality. Among those released from prison, there were also 12 people linked to the media, including two of my colleagues who are currently in this auditorium, Miguel Mendoza, a sport reporter and blogger, and Juan Lorenzo Holmann, general manager of the daily newspaper *La Prensa*. All of them have been convicted without any evidence for alleged crimes of conspiracy against national sovereignty, money laundering and spreading fake news, and were held in isolation in prison up to 600 days. As a result of the political persecution in Nicaragua, there no longer any independent sources to whom facts, data or analysis can be attributed because of fears of political reprisals, including imprisonment, all of them, without exception, request anonymity as a condition to inform or give their opinions to the press. This double-sided criminalization of both freedom of the press and freedom of expression with the purpose of silencing journalist news sources and freedom of opinion represents the latest stage in a long process of demolishing the rule of law in Nicaragua in the last 15 years.

Under the defacto police state, there is no freedom of assembly or association, nor freedom of religion in Nicaragua. In 2021, the regime erased the possibility of holding free elections, and since 2022 it has increased its relentless persecution against civil society, shutting down more than 3,400 non-governmental organizations. In this context, journalism born from exile, remains the last reserve of all our constitutional freedoms. Since the last five years, since the political crisis exploded in April 2018, repression against journalism included assassination and physical assaults, television censorship, physical destruction of media outlet, constant blockades to prevent newspapers from getting paper and other materials, and all of these culminated in the closure and confiscation of media outlets, the imposition of new repressive laws and the imprisonment of journalists.

The last one occurred just last week. Journalist Víctor Ticay from Channel Ten was captured by the police for the alleged crime that he published a report on Facebook about a religious procession during Wednesday in Easter. To continue reporting and telling the truth under a dictatorship is an act of resistance. My own newsroom, *Confidencial*, has been confiscated and seized twice by the police. First on December 2018, and secondly, on May 2021, when the police once again stole all our computers and TV equipment. Despite all that, we never stop reporting and broadcasting, not even a single day, by using digital platforms, internet, and social media. Ortega also confiscated the TV channel Siempre Siento Noticias and the newspaper *La Prensa*, but he has never been able to silence journalism itself. The media that I just mentioned continue to report from exile.

The regime has also shut down more than 50 local radio and television stations and more than 150 journalists have been forced into exile. Some of them have reorganized around some 25 digital media outlets, mainly in Costa Rica, the United States, and Spain. However, more than a third of exile journalists have had to take on other jobs to survive, or have left the profession for fear of reprisals against their families. Our television programs have been banned from broadcast and cable television, but we continue to reach a growing audience through YouTube channels and Facebook. Social media, ironically, represents an extraordinary vehicle for overcoming censorship, but it has also become a space for disinformation and political polarization that competes against the independent press.

Since May 2021, I have been in exile in Costa Rica for the second time to avoid being silenced because of a criminal indictment and an arrest warrant for me in Nicaragua. My entire newsroom and practically all independent media are also working from exile. Exile is

no longer a temporary emergency situation that forces us to leave and relocate in another country. It is now a permanent, median-term condition that poses immense challenges to journalism. I will just mention five.

First, security, the challenge of preserving internet access and digital security, and providing security to our sources, a network of collaborators in the country. Reporting on Nicaragua from outside the country requires cultivating sources that are actively at risk under the police state. We must guarantee secure channels of communication to protect our sources and offer them anonymity. But at the same time, we have to raise the standards of verification and corroboration with anonymous sources in order to continue publishing reliable information. We are journalists, not activists, and our main mission is to maintain the credibility of the press at all costs, even in the midst of the worst conditions of political polarization. Third, we also face the challenge of continuing to innovate in digital platforms in order to strengthen our relationship with our audiences. When the rule of law has collapsed, we depend exclusively on our audiences to defend journalism. Four, we must continue to promote collaborative journalism among ourselves — I'm talking about the exiled media, the Nicaraguan exile media — but also with the regional and international press. And last but not least, we face the challenge of the financial sustainability of journalism in exile, when our traditional advertisers have also been criminalized. The crisis forces us to look for new models of economic management to finance the independence of our media through international donations, audience contributions and commercial monetization. But this also demands a paradigm shift for philanthropic foundations and for international aid agencies that support independent journalism. It becomes necessary to recognize that the survival of the press in exile — not only in Nicaragua, Cuba and Venezuela, but also in Russia, in Ukraine, in Iran, in Afghanistan, in Myanmar and other countries — is a democratic imperative that requires long-term support strategies.

None of our journalistic investigations about corruption or violation of human rights has ever produced any change in the public policies of Daniel Ortega's authoritarian regime, which is not designed to be held accountable. However, many of these stories have been valuable inputs for the reports of crimes against humanity in Nicaragua that the group of experts of the United Nations recently have prepared. So together with the families of the victims of repression and human rights defenders, journalists have documented the first draft of truth and memory to lay the foundations of justice as one of the pillars for the restitution of democracy in Nicaragua. I finish with an invitation... In November last year, we organized a forum with the support of the Deutsche Welle Academy, a two-day virtual forum with the participation of 15 media outlets, mostly media in exile from Nicaragua, Cuba, Venezuela, but also from Guatemala and El Salvador. The cases are not identical, but we do share many things in common, and we do have to learn a lot from each other. Thank you.

**Kathleen McElroy** Next will be Olga, the independent journalist and podcast host of “Hi. You’re a Foreign Agent.” So please come up. And while we're getting your slides ready, I just want to say if I sounded like a bit of a censor, I didn't mean to sound that way. I'm just I am so amazed by these very brave people. So thank you.

**Olga Churakova** Hi, everyone. It's a great honor to speak with all of you guys, and I have to wait while, oh, here we go. I have been working in independent media in Russia for more than ten years. To be honest, I don't remember a single year without pressure on the media in Russia during Putin's era. So at the beginning, I would like to start from a very quick idea of what happened in recent years with media in Russia and how we actually

came to exile. Then I would like to share some lessons. It wouldn't be original, but we'll see.

When I was covering politics, I witnessed how the government, step by step, create laws which made our work harder. The first bill rang in 2014 after the annexation of Crimea, when foreigners are no longer allowed to own Russian media. It doesn't work. Oh, here we go. On this slide, I keep my front page in 2018; I wrote an article about the Russian government tightening legislation on foreign agents. Back then, our thoughts were that it would be against opposition, and who can imagine then, in 2021, I became a foreign agent myself. In the summer of 2021, the police came to my colleagues, and I worked for an investigative media outlet, *Proekt*, back then. A few members of the team were searched and police opened a criminal case against them, and a week later *Proekt* was recognized as an undesirable organization. Then all of us became this weird things like foreign agents.

What does it mean to journalists? You're forced to waste time on nonsense instead of work. I shall report all of my income and expenses, spend money on reports and bookkeeping and special forms, and all the visual materials and social network posts, I must make a disclaimer that is 24 characters long. It looks like this. Yeah. Uh, sorry. I have to put it in all my social media informing that I am a foreign agent. Basically, you could lead with that until you keep silent about everything. And since now everyone is afraid to employ us, so if you ever think of changing your job for something better paying, it's not an option if you're a foreign agent. The recognition of our organization as undesirable means that our readers cannot repost our material, our names cannot be under the text, and any cooperation is illegal. We were the first media that the authorities named undesirable, now we have a bunch of them.

How do we respond to that challenge? Of course, we started our own media. As you all understand, we all wanted to stay in our country while it's still possible. So me and my colleague decided to try to record a podcast episode about new enemies of the people. It starts as a look into our lives in Russia after being labeled and then in turning into anti-war micro media, featuring stories of people living both in Russia and exile. Today, this is a media for everyone who feels like a bit of a foreign agent or enemy of the people in Russia and abroad. When full scale war started, all of us had to leave the country, first of all, because of new immediate legislation since full-scale invasion we can't write even the word "war" in the Russian media, we can call it only "special operation", which is a lie. All information about troops or soldiers or losses is illegal or considered espionage and slander against the Russian military, so no one wants to lie to their readers and listeners.

Consequences. After a year of full scale war... Now the list of foreign agents and undesirable organizations in Russia includes at least 600 points. About 20 media were closed, more than 5,000 journalists were forced to leave the country in 2022. It's only 2022. About 140 times journalists were detained for covering peaceful anti-war protests in Russia, and at least 34 journalists began to be prosecuted in anti-war cases, which means that they wrote something anti-war. Currently, now 22 of them are in prison; several face up to ten years in prison on charges of spreading fake news about war.

Challenges and lessons. So you might think that it's a panel about hopelessness, but no place for hopelessness, at least not in my ten minutes. New media projects, nevertheless, grow like mushrooms. At least a dozen new media write about the war in Ukraine, Russian society, ecology, politics and economics. Some of them opened in Russia, others abroad, which means that Russian journalists don't want to give up or they are insane or both. At

the beginning of the war, the audience doubled, and people really desperately need information about what's happening everywhere in Russia and Ukraine.

Lesson number two. Oh, sorry. Lesson number two, you need to prepare the ground for exile in advance. In the year before the war, when everyone was labeled as a foreign agent, our media actually began to prepare the ground in other countries to look for contacts of people who could help with documents. Those who began to prepare this plan in advance most quickly adapted to the new reality. Exile and work in exile is a big stress for which no one is ready anyway, and it's better to be a little less unprepared.

Lesson number three, think about technical adaptations and ways to bypass your media blocking. Now Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and even TikTok are banned in Russia, and YouTube will apparently be blocked as well. We must think about our readers, how to help them, constantly look for technical solutions, constantly remind them where is the commentary that we sent to us.

Lesson number four, I won't be original, thinking about financial survival in advance, how not to be left without a piece of bread in exile. The advertising model after the start of the war almost doesn't work. The biggest foreign advertisers left the market. Russian ones do not seek to work with independent media. For example, already in the first weeks of the war, advertising fell and independent business media fell by 18% or 19%. Crowdfunding revenues have fallen critically, too. Russians are blocked for transfers abroad, and besides, not everyone is ready for the likely prosecution for supporting outlawed journalists. So someone early mentioned that he or she sold a car for his own project, I'm actually ready to sell it, too, but I don't have it, so. Think about it in advance.

Lesson number five, it's even in such a situation, do not rely only on grants. It's not a secret. The nonprofit model turned out to be the most demanded, and demand for grants from institutional donors has grown significantly. The volume of grant applications from Russian size has doubled. I can see from my experience that Russian projects are not popular now due to many circumstances. As a small project, we are looking for options for how to survive, my plan was to do only my own project and to work on that but unfortunately, I can't afford it now.

Lesson number six — and it's at the moment when I give up with the pictures — the problems of journalism do not end with exile, and you have to think about how to find a place where you will not be kicked out. You have to think about safety; I agree with Carlos, it's the most important thing for us is how to keep them safe. Many, of course, if you refuse to collaborate to give us comments and they afraid to be persecuted for working with the media in exile, but it's is not the reason to give up again. We are constantly concerned that our informants should not be found or arrested, and our families who stay at home are also a source of pressure and risk.

Lesson number seven, do not forget the roots. Please constantly be in contact with those who are in Russia. Our audience now was divided into those who left and those who are in Russia. While we see a large gap between active and educated people who left and stayed. People in Russia began to feel that people outside no longer understand and represent them. We have now 50/50 audience who left and stayed, and we need to somehow find a common language for them and to be a bridge between them. Now we are trying to give our listeners a sense of community and also support them during these dark times for all of us.

You're not safe, even if you left. Like my last lesson, you're not safe even if you left, and even if you are a foreign correspondent. Work in Russia ended not only for Russian media, but also for almost all foreign media, and it's getting harder and harder to get information from Russia. We don't really understand what's going on in the Kremlin, because all high-ranking Russian sources have stopped communicating with a lot of local reporters. So I wanted to say thank you. A big thank you, actually, for all international journalists, and especially for all American journalists who still covering Russia under huge risk. You can see this reporter from *Wall Street Journal*, Evan Gershkovich, and he's an American citizen. He was arrested a few weeks ago in Russia, and he actually tried to do my job. The least I could do for him, I am going to ask you to support him because it's like a five day challenge for friends of Evan. Please write letters to him to Moscow prison. If you don't know how to do it, I can give you instruction. Please support him, and his family and friends desperately need all our support. Thank you.

**Kathleen McElroy** Thank you. We will get that information on how to write the letters. Thank you. Next is Danny Fenster, who's the editor at large at *Frontier Myanmar*.

**Danny Fenster** Thank you. Really, really happy, grateful and humbled to be here sitting alongside these journalists. I'm in a unique position of not being forced into exile exactly, but forced back to my home country, out of the country I was reporting on. I've spent the last year at Harvard with Olga, and I've spoken with Carlos and Juan, and I know very well how much more they've all had to sacrifice than me. I came to Burma to Myanmar in 2018 for several reasons, but among them, I wanted to see journalism being done where the act of doing it itself was contested. Where writers' and reporters' freedoms and lives were really on the line, and where despite this, they'd continued doing it and in fact had been doing it for many years. Reporting in America seemed to be getting increasingly dangerous at the time, and I thought journalists in other countries had earned valuable insights that I might be able to steal or at least take inspiration from, and I was not wrong. I showed up early to my first newsroom on my first day there, hoping to impress the editor. It was apparently too late. The place was empty, save for one overworked twentysomething, hunched over his keyboard and pulling out his hair, scrutinizing some photo online for more information. Myo Min was the first reporter I met in Burma. He's ethnically Rakhine from the far west of the country, where at the time the military was engaged in a brutal war with an armed Rakhine independence group and where his family still remained. He welcomed me and gave me a tour of the office, then jumped right back into his investigation, working the phones, calling contacts on the ground in Rakhine, trying to verify casualty numbers.

I was impressed that he was reporting every day on the military's daily crimes and atrocities, including from the front line. Everyone knew how brutal the Burmese military was and still is to its critics and enemies. At the time, one of his editors was facing charges for publishing his reporting. And the *Reuters* reporters, Wa Lone and Kyaw Sow were at that very moment still sitting in the country's infamous Insein prison, having been there for more than 500 days at that point for uncovering a massacre of Rohingya Muslims by the military in the same region that Myo Min was reporting on.

Beginning in 2011 or so, the military dictatorship began a reform process that included some civilian power sharing and a significant opening of press freedoms, including a rollback of pre-publication censorship. Newspapers and journals boomed. Outlets and activists who had been working in exile for decades came rushing back in, and with them Western media development aid. My colleague Sabiha mentioned a joke yesterday that in Bangladesh one is free to say or write whatever they want, there's just no guarantee

afterwards of their freedom. And Bopha spoke movingly about journalism in Cambodia when there was always a threat of death or imprisonment, but where the story would still get printed or go online and get out. Journalists in Myanmar for several years existed in this uneasy but hopeful state. When I arrived, RSF had Burma rated as 138th country out of 184 press freedoms.

The first story I wrote after leaving that first outlet was actually a defamation case brought against Myo Min right after I left. Ironically, it wasn't about the war. It was about his reporting on a hotel here in Rakhine charged with money laundering. The hotelier didn't like seeing her case in the newspaper and had powerful connections. That the case could even be brought is a testament to the bizarre legal environment in which Burmese reporters have always had to work. You never knew what story might get you in trouble. All of that changed, though on February 1, 2021; the military launched the coup, ending its decade-long experiment in power sharing and free speech. The entire country has been in revolt ever since. It's illegal to describe the actions that day as a coup. It's illegal to get quotes from opposition figures because they've been declared unlawful associations, and speaking with an unlawful association is illegal. It's illegal to write or say anything that might cause fear or spread fake news.

On May 24, 2021, I was arrested and charged with all of these crimes. I was at the magazine *Frontier Myanmar* by then. We'd decided at the time to remain cautiously as long as we could on the ground, which still seemed possible then. The military had already begun gunning down protesters, raiding newsrooms and the homes of local journalists who are moving each night from safehouse to safehouse. Most of my previous employers had fled across borders or oceans, but because we published primarily in English, we thought we had remained off their radar. During the six months I was held in Insein prison, I had no idea how bad things were getting. I would sit in the prison yard and watch military planes overhead and wonder what was happening outside, trying to make sense of the rumors I was hearing. When I got out, I learned that my entire team had briefly gone dark, then reappeared in Thailand across the eastern border, and were publishing from there. Only state propaganda remained inside. Journalists face imprisonment, torture and murder. Myanmar, now, according to RSF, has become the second largest jailer of journalists in the world behind China. They've put them now at 176 out of 180 on their press freedom rankings.

I went to see my colleagues in Thailand shortly after my release. None of them speak Thai, and many of them feel isolated. They were missing their parents and loved ones who they'd at first thought they would only be away from temporarily, but we're starting to realize that this might be a long-term situation. Sources in the country are terrified of speaking with them, and that's when they can be reached at all, when the electricity and internet are working. But still many of them are doing better than others they know. They still get to report. Myo Min, who at the time of the coup was a senior reporter for *Radio Free Asia*, made an arduous trip overland through jungle into Thailand and eventually with the help of the U.S. State Department to Minnesota with his wife and child, but assistance beyond that is limited. He can't help himself from blogging, commentary and analysis on events in Myanmar, but he also has a family to provide for in an expensive country. When I last spoke to him, he said he was looking at programs where he might become a nurse's assistant.

I think every outfit I worked at in Burma existed in some part on grants from Western governments and NGOs, and an inevitable question came up at the global journalism panel yesterday about what the West owes these journalists and organizations or what we

can do to support them. These are questions I've been thinking a lot about this year. I have some thoughts but I don't have any clear answers, and I'd love to talk to anybody out there who's also been thinking about this. I'm wondering if this is something that Western governments are obliged to take up, the United States, or our state governments inherently bad at this sort of thing, or at least susceptible to getting these outlets and reporters labeled as foreign agents? What independent groups and funds are needed and how can this be done transparently? How do we deal with these new issues of statelessness reporters, people without visas or any clear way to get visas to stay in the places they need to report safely from? Certainly what exists right now is not designed to support the reality of long-term exile journalism. I think we've all seen the statistics and we've all seen the trends happening that this is only a growing problem. Again, thank you.

**Kathleen McElroy** Next, we'll hear from Juan Luis Font, a former journalist and radio host of *ConCriterio*, from Guatemala and about Guatemala.

**Juan Luis Font** Thank you very much. It took me a long time to accept that I have to leave Guatemala for good. I first left my country in April 2022. I was being harassed by the attorney general's office. My name was mentioned in four different legal cases. I was called before the judge, always under the charges of money laundering that to this day they have not been able to plant a formal accusation against me in either of those cases. The attorney general's office in Guatemala coordinates with this paralegal organization who's president has claimed that one of his missions is to erase José Rubén Zamora and me as journalistic references in Guatemala. José Rubén has been in jail, you all know, since July 2022. I run a daily radio talk show; it's three of us as anchors. My two colleagues are in Guatemala. Fortunately, they are not under threat by the government. One of them is critical of the political situation. The other one is rather complacent with the establishment and is keen to convey that what is happening in Guatemala is not really different from what has always been our political reality.

We run a very lively discussion every day about democracy, how it is under siege in Guatemala, or if democratic institutions in our country have always been short of a marriage. I have to say that one of my biggest challenges is to keep my temper on these debates. We get together every morning at 6:00 Guatemalan time. I am I do this show through the internet, which has been very, very useful in. I also join the daily budget meeting with the newsroom to plan for the next day's show. I keep in touch with many sources who provide tips, data and inside information that includes opposition leaders and even government authorities who are willing to talk to me. Of course, they only accept to engage in conversation if they are sure that the talk is encrypted. The government and its allies, among them the biggest entrepreneurs of Guatemala, have tried very hard to suffocate our business by discontinuing their advertisement in *ConCriterio*, by taking over the radio station where we used to broadcast our show, or by asking gently or menacingly to most of our advertisers to pull their ads from the show. Our audience is quite aware of the situation, and they applaud the daily debate that we keep alive. Most of them understand that I was forced to leave the country and frequently show solidarity. We conduct every day at least half a dozen interviews with Guatemalan authorities, politicians, all kinds of people. Few of them show some sympathy towards me, but occasionally some of them will mention mockingly or in a spiteful way that I am on the run from justice. Some call me a liar and demanded me to go back to face the justice system. What justice, I ask them. The one that has kept my colleague, José Rubén Zamora, nine months in prison so far? The one that has pressed charges against his attorneys? Three different attorney teams to simply deny him his right to have a proper defense. They don't even accept his proof of this charge. But I rather have people address me aggressively telling me that I

should be in jail because it makes that way of oppression blatant. I'd rather have that than having disingenuous interviewers ignore the attacks on fellow citizens' liberties, probably to conceal or to normalize the rapidly degrading of democratic institutions in Guatemala. Some of them tried to present as normal, what is going on — either out of self-interest or out of fear.

Guatemala doesn't suffer a dictatorship like the one that we're seeing in Nicaragua, embodied by Daniel Ortega and his wife. They're really like the prototype of the tropical dictator or the dictatorship. But once they flee that country or they are turned down from power, the dictatorship must probably tumble in Nicaragua. On the opposite, in Guatemala, we live under a corporate tyranny. There is a strong alliance among the presidency, the majority in Congress, the judiciary, the attorney general's office, the electoral authorities, and even the economic elite to keep running a system that benefits only a few and seems intent on perpetrating in power. Let me give you a figure to stress what I say that the government or the way that my country is governed only benefits a few. One out of every two kids in Guatemala suffers chronic malnutrition. That means that they are not going to develop their mental capacities for life, and the state simply doesn't address that, which is the biggest problem of all of our people.

The next elections, unfortunately, are simply a formal process to appoint a different president, but the corrupt system will certainly prevail. Despite multiple denunciations of manipulation of the electoral process like blocking opposition candidates, they will insist that the new president has been freely elected. But too many of the political and economic leaders we interview every morning refrain from mentioning the situation that keeps more than 60 judges, magistrates, former attorneys, journalists and human rights activists in exile. Conducting the national debate amid attacks on my credibility and reputation has been a challenge, of course. Keeping an independent media outlet afloat under the embargo of the economic elite also has been a challenge. Facing their sheer determination to sabotage our commercial efforts has also been a major challenge. Continuing the work of delivering professional journalism to our audiences, despite defunding and the rapidly devolving political situation, has also been a big challenge. But the closing in of the dark forces on freedom of press, freedom of speech and other civil liberties, is the greatest challenge yet to face. Thank you very much.

**Kathleen McElroy** Thank you so much for hearing from all of you. I have a couple of questions that I hope all of you can answer and tell us how it works. Carlos had mentioned how you have to rely on anonymous sources, could you say the extent to which you have to have multiple people confirming information because you can't name people?

**Carlos Fernando Chamorro** Well, our daily work has changed from bad to worse to worse to something completely impossible. Most of our... Well we were deprived from public access to information about 15 years ago, and we are dependent on independent sources. I'm talking about economists, political analysts, common citizens, lawyers, doctors. During COVID-19, the government simply declared officially that there were no dead people in Nicaragua because of COVID-19. Actually, the official record is about, I think, 146 persons died. The mortality rate overpassed probably 20,000. This is something that we reported at that time with doctors, with independent doctors or with experts in public health. Well, those sources now are criminalized. They cannot talk about any issue at all. So what I was trying to say is, yes, there are people in Nicaragua, mostly people in exile, who are willing to talk to the press. Some are afraid and said, "Well, if I said something, they could take reprisals against my family." What we have seen is that people give a lot of opinions and give very little facts, and we have to do extra triple work in order

to go to the roots of information. I don't trust everyone who says, I don't want to give you any information, everything has to be anonymous. OK, if he says that I need two, three, four, or five different ways of corroborating that information. It has imposed an enormous burden of extra work in order to guarantee the public that what we publish is reliable. It's very, very difficult.

**Kathleen McElroy** Thank you. Would others of you like to talk about getting that level of accuracy because many of your sources cannot be identified.

**Danny Fenster** I mean, *Frontier* is in a slightly different position where we're working on feature sort of more deeply reported, a little bit more time. So it's not necessarily daily news that we have to sort of... We don't have that time constraint for corroboration. But there is a general... It's extremely, I don't know if polarized is the right word because the entire country is basically in revolt against the military there, but there's so much passion. You have a lot of people that when reporters are able to connect with them, want to document atrocities and war crimes, but they also want to downplay deaths that may have occurred on a resistance militia sides. They want to report every death or more than the deaths that occurred on the military side. So you're contending with that, that sort of thing. You can get several people to give you what they've seen or what they know about a specific incident, and you kind of have to write in a way that makes clear that it's very difficult to verify this. The total number cannot be verified, but we've compiled estimates, things like that.

**Olga Churakova** I can respond on that, too. So I see two problems. One, as a political journalist, I know that a lot of my sources in the Kremlin and Russian parliament, they just refuse to speak with me now because I'm abroad, because it's dangerous for them. All information that we actually have inside of Kremlin, it's like a speculation or it's data from CAI and all that. We can read *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*, it's not our information, actually, it's something else that I could rely on this. It's a problem for all political journalists, like it's a problem to convince people to speak with you if you are a political journalist now. The second problem is if you're making reports about Russian citizens, for example, it's also very hard to convince them to be in your work. A very recent case, my colleague from TV Rain, she made a documentary movie about people who are volunteers in Russia. They helped Ukrainians who escaped through Russia further and they make a movie about this. It was one of the heroes, she was with her own face in this movie, and what's happened after this movie when it was shown, police immediately open case against these people. So now they are abroad. So actually not a journalist, but it became more and more dangerous for people to collaborate with independent media. It doesn't matter if it's sources or it's just citizens, it's dangerous for all of them.

**Kathleen McElroy** Luis, because the nature of your program is very different. How do you all see — I don't want to use the term Western media — the media from outside of your country covering your country? Is there some that you think, wow, they nailed it or some, hm, that's not exactly right? Are you following media out of your country from the outside?

**Juan Luis Font** I would say that we would like to find more interest of Western media on the Guatemalan case. But we understand that being a dictator is so close to Guatemala, like Daniel Ortega. Being such an extreme case in Nicaragua or these very, I would say, attractive case in El Salvador with this autocratic way. The Guatemalan case comes to it's not as attractive. It is not as important, even though I am very impressed that the case of José Rubén Zamora has been all over the media and has kept on the news for at least the last nine months. That's very important for us. We'd like to see much more interest not only

in the U.S. media, but also in the regional media. Mexico almost ignores whatever happens in Central America. I would say Colombia doesn't pay that much attention, and those are countries that have a lot of influence over us because they are the biggest economies in our region.

**Carlos Fernando Chamorro** I want to add to what Juan Luis just said, which is that in our region, sometimes our neighbor countries are not really doing a good job in reporting our own crisis, talking about the press in Honduras or in Central America. There are cycles of coverage; when crises are hit, yes, there is attention. When there are some specific dates and moments... Like about a year ago there was going to be some kind of fake elections in Nicaragua. The elections were completely annulled beforehand, and all candidates were taken to prison, there was no competition. But there was interest in general in the international press; the day after, they forgot about it. I think the worst enemy that we have is the intention of the dictatorship to establish some kind of pattern of normalization. Some countries contribute to that, by the way, in which they normalize things, including international organizations like the IMF or the World Bank, in the sense that, OK, they are dealing with these countries. This is the case of Nicaragua. They are not taking into account issues of humanitarian crisis, of human rights violations as a basic standard of democracy about the kind of relationship that they could have.

But the most important thing I would say would be to get the international press interested. It's very important what the CPJ is doing, for instance, or International Organization for Press Defenders, but it's even much more important to have stories, to have coverage. Now, how do you cover a country when a journalist cannot get in? OK, if you said I'm a journalist, you would be deported. So it requires other ways or other methods of contacting sources, and probably in some cases, I would say would require some, let's say, nontraditional ways of getting in. It's the same thing that I mentioned before about the sources. There are sources within the government of people close to the government who it takes a lot of time to get in touch with them and to have contact, to build trust for them to give us information. The most important leaks about corruption, in some cases they have come from people inside the government.

**Kathleen McElroy** Olga, your country has received a lot of attention.

**Olga Churakova** From one perspective, yes, but from another, I would like to see more news from the Russia side because we have a lot of news from the warzone, but we don't have enough news from what's happened actually inside. And Evan Gershkovich was one of the last reporters who did this job for Western media, and he paid quite a lot for this. Now, while he's in prison. So I can say that I would like generally to see more stories from Russia, from Cambodia, from Myanmar, from Nicaragua, from all these countries, and...

**Kathleen McElroy** And stories about Russia, not just the war.

**Olga Churakova** Yeah, I don't see stories not about war, to be honest now, because it's all about war, all media is about war now. It's a new reality and we should accept this. But just like what happened inside, it's really important because society changed dramatically, and I don't see that Western media actually understand it.

**Danny Fenster** For the case of Myanmar, I think it's more about sort of amplification and exposure. There's some wire services. I think AFP and Reuters has been there for a long time and they do good work. It's not that the coverage is bad, it's not a priority for Western outlets. *Frontier* is a team of local Burmese reporters that write in English. And I think part

of the goal is to get the world's attention and to... it fits into an ecosystem of news that exists out there where I think a lot of other Western reporters learn about stories through outlets like *Frontier* and another English language outlets there. But I don't have specific criticisms. *The Times* has got Richard Paddock and Hannah Beech that cover the region, and I think they do a great job when they're covering it. It's just an issue of... You know, the panel before was talking about knowing what the reader wants. Americans don't care and they're just not that interested, I think.

**Kathleen McElroy** Hmm. We invite people here to come up to ask questions, there are mics on either end, and while we're waiting for people who have questions... You all had touched on that being able to convene has been important and that there needs to be more of that. Do you want to elaborate on funding, whether it's financed by government or by foundations?

**Danny Fenster** Um, let me add one other point about getting that exposure. I think the regional sort of collaboration is really important, that's a big problem in ASEAN as well. There could be a lot more regional collaboration and other countries reporting on their neighbors.

For the funding, it seems like there's somewhat of an ecosystem that's starting to emerge. Maria Ressa has this... Is it Independent Fund for Public Interest Journalism or something like that? So a lot of the grant-making apparatus right now is like they'll have stipulations like it has to be on the ground coverage. It's dictated by certain coverage areas that the grantee wants more coverage of. You're free to cover it how you want but these are the issues we're going to fund coverage for. That's just not it's not keeping up, I don't think, with the reality that so many journalists now have to report on just the entirety of their country from abroad. None of that speaks in any way to the necessity of needing a visa, becoming stateless, all these issues that are sort of transnational or non-national. These issues that nobody has thought solutions of before, but are desperately needed.

**Juan Luis Font** I have to say that it is very inspiring to convene here and find all the Nicaraguans that just left prison, and finding with many other journalists that are living in the same conditions that I do, a lot of energy, a lot of plans, a lot of will to keep going on. Even though this has been difficult and there is a lot of way ahead, I think this has been very useful. And also, I have to say that the panels that we have had today have been giving us a lot of hints and ideas of how we could start news outlets from abroad. How could we start up with something different? And how we can go on even though we are living this very difficult and different way of life now?

**Kathleen McElroy** And ISOJ and the Knight people are to be applauded for even holding this type of panel where you can all be together, and others in the audience who are going through this situation.

**Danny Fenster** Yeah. Thank you very much to the organizers for having this panel.

**Kathleen McElroy** I will take a question there and then over here.

**Audience Member** Thank you, for your testimony, all of you, and my considerations to everything you go through. There are a lot of funds or help, emergency funds, when you need to leave your country and go out so you are not detained or you are not killed. But once these funds are over, how do you survive in exile? How do journalists survive in exile day to day?

**Danny Fenster** As I said early on, I don't have a lot of answers. I have a lot of questions. I mean, there are ways to survive, but there's not many ways to survive and continue doing journalism. I think that's really the problem. I think people, when they leave, they want to continue reporting on their country. Money, and it kind of comes down to that.

**Juan Luis Font** Well, we are trying to keep alive our radio talk show and our TV show in Guatemala. We are facing, as I was mentioning, a lot of pressure from the government and from the economic elite in the country, but even though we still find some advertisers who want to be with us and want to support the effort. I'm not going to say that this is going to be easy. It has not been easy. You are not asking me. Of course, we haven't collected any salary from last December, but we also find a lot of consultancies and a lot of studies that are asked on and are available for people like us. I just finished very interesting reporting on how freedom of press and freedom of expression is under danger in the whole Central American region. I was mentioning that it was really amazing to see how even in Costa Rica, which has always been like a democracy happening in Central America, we start to see some signs of autocratic ways of governing.

**Carlos Fernando Chamorro** In the case of Nicaragua, there has been a change in the traditional model of financing the media, which was mostly privately oriented toward advertising. Let's say. I had something like 25 clients in 2018. Today I have two. Only two, and some of them said, well, we cannot invest in advertisement because, well, the risk economic recession, but also because you are criminalized. If we associate with you, we are going to have legal problems. Then we have the technological challenges about how do we face the big giants in technology in terms of advertisement. Well, we are in a disadvantaged situation. We're monetizing YouTube particularly and we are trying to do many things. I believe there's not one single solution. You mentioned something about don't trust grants, but we need grants. We are offering short-term solutions to a long-term problem. I know the grants will not be there permanently, but we need a basic relationship with organization that would support the media. Then, obviously, we have to innovate. We have to create different forms to engage our audience, membership programs, etc., different things, and also commercial initiatives. But there is a combination, at least, of some of these three things that we need. But my impression is that there is not a general full understanding of the dimension of this problem. It's not just one country. There is many other countries in which the media is also in exile.

**Kathleen McElroy** And that has been a question online: How can we or the philanthropic community better support you? It seems like, as Danny saying, that is the question. That is one of the many unanswered questions.

**Olga Churakova** Okay. I wanted to add something to this. I mentioned that I do not feel like we rely on grants because it's not like... I wanted to find a solution for a sustainable model, even now, because I don't want to be fully dependent from organizations. Um, trust grants, but please look for other options. Speaking about support, thanks to Nieman Foundation and to this conference, I will survive until June pretty much successfully. After that, I don't I don't have any plan because I want to be closer to my country. And it's a problem that started from the very beginning. Right now, I don't have any visas to Europe, because it's really hard to get a visa. The place where I could actually go after U.S. It's Turkey, and they have their own problems and dictators, and it's not the most safe place for me. So I know that I can find in organizations. I think the most that I need for, speaking about myself, is visa support, document support, and things like that. Because if you have

documents, you can sell corn on the street and during the night you can like record broadcasts for your audience, and it would be an option.

**Danny Fenster** Yeah, I think just to add to the philanthropy, like these people that are basically a refugee once this has happened, they need financial support just to stay alive and to eat. But other in-kind sort of work, I think, that's really important, as these like legal sort of legal scholars or human rights workers or something that can find new systems or new legal vehicles for somebody who's now stateless or somebody who needs a visa but doesn't have an employer. These structures... These institutions don't exist, so that also needs to be created.

**Kathleen McElroy** It's like a recognition of the permanence and the state in being stateless.

**Danny Fenster** Yeah. I mean, I'm hesitant to admit that it's a permanent sort of thing, but it's certainly needed in the meantime.

**Audience Member** First of all, huge respect to all of you in solidarity with everything you're going through and the work you're doing. I wanted to ask in the different countries that you come from, are the sites that you write on or broadcast on, have they been blocked by the government in the different countries? If they have then how do you reach your audiences over there? If they haven't why do you think they've gone to such great lengths to basically kick you out and persecute you, but not to block those sites?

**Juan Luis Font** Like for my radio show, it is very difficult to find a station that wants to broadcast it. We used to have... We were renting this other station and by October 2022, even though we have a contract for five years and we have only spent two years and a half, the owner told us that he wanted us to leave and he wanted to get in the court and that he had this very good offer from a chamber of industry. The economical elite, they just wanted us out of that radio station because this was a very good one, because it had a very good segment of the population with a very good purchasing power. So we started looking for another station and it was very difficult to find this one, which is a very popular one; we had to make a lot of changes in our content to address to this new segment, but we luckily found another one. Even though we only have a contract for one year, we hope that they are not going to be able to press them the owner to have us leaving there next year. Of course, we are also broadcasting through YouTube, through digital radio, through Facebook, and in the worst case, we think that we are only going to have to rely on the social media.

**Olga Churakova** Well, in Russia, it's about like ten thousand resources and media sites were blocked last year — about 10,000; it's a huge number. They constantly blocked podcasts, too. Apple Podcasts, while they were working in Russia, don't want to promote any content about war, and they want to see it because it's a big U.S. corporation. So that's how they look in Russia. So, thank God, people know how to use VPN now in Russia and the younger generation shows grandparents how to use VPN, shows to grandparents how to watch YouTube, and step by step. But you never know what will happen tomorrow, and you have to be able to be very focused on technical issues. Yes, to constantly remind to all your listeners that you can listen us there and there and there, and here is the links, here is the VPN, this is what we can do for you. So yeah, it became one of your headaches.

**Danny Fenster** Uh, yeah, the Myanmar military, they're pretty incompetent. So the first thing that they tried to do immediately after the coup was to just shut the internet down completely, and it quickly became apparent that you can't really run an economy without an internet. So they turned it back on. They've blocked some sites, but it's not very effective. I think people are still reading, when there is power, and when the internet's working, people are still reading. VPN use went from like near zero to widespread overnight. That's one success I think that some NGOs had like I.T. for development or I.T. NGOs. So many immediately came to Myanmar and started giving out free access to VPNs, and it really boosted the usage. But their attempts are pretty crude, It's the one bright spot, maybe.

**Carlos Fernando Chamorro** There are two countries in Latin America that I would say are in the worst condition in terms of the state capacity to intervene, to manipulate or to block access to the internet for the media and for the public, and these are Cuba and Venezuela. Nicaragua is, let's say, less worse, we are in the state of uncertainty. You have on the one hand, the official media, which is run by the presidential family — different television stations, radio and internet outlets — then you have non-official media which is under threat co-opted by the state. So they don't they cannot report on public events. Then you have the independent media in exile, depending on the access to internet and social media. For how long? Well, we hope that this situation will contain. We don't know until when.

**Kathleen McElroy** And now our last question of today's session.

**Javier Melero** This is going to be really fast. I am a Javier Melero. I am the co-founder of *El Pitazo*, a news outlet from Venezuela. I just want to say thank you for sharing your experiences. My question would be, how can we help more from the media perspective, let's say? And that we have to maybe talk a bit more because, well, in our case, we've been dealing with censorship and an authoritarian regime for the past eight years in the case of *El Pitazo*, so it's been longer than that for the country. But maybe we can come up with solutions to similar problems. That's it. Thank you.

**Kathleen McElroy** On this I wanted to say the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas has been at the forefront of doing this type of work, and I know it will continue to do so. But it seems like all of us can do more to try to answer that question and try to figure out, just not from journalism, but from all angles, as you pointed out, whether it's I.T, government... I think that is it for the... Let's thank our incredibly brave, fearless journalists.