

A Conversation with the Director and Journalists of Endangered (2022)
on the Threats Facing Journalists in the United States and Abroad
at the Human Security Law Center’s Symposium on Press Freedom Under Attack:
21st-Century Threats to Journalists—and Democracy

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On November 4, 2022, the Human Security Law Center, in partnership with the Reves Center for International Studies and the Virginia Center for Investigative Journalism, WHRO, hosted a panel event with the Emmy award-winning co-director of *Endangered*, Rachel Grady, and two journalists involved in the documentary—award-winning Miami Herald photojournalist Carle-Philippe Juste, and former Executive Director of the Committee to Protect Journalists, Joel Simon.¹ Professor Nancy Combs, Director of the Human Security Law Center, moderated the event.

Early in the documentary, *Endangered*, a woman from Youngstown, Ohio, remarked, “I’m not going to buy a newspaper that does not reflect my views.” She expressed that she stopped buying the newspaper of the city’s only local news outlet, *The Vindicator*, which at the time of her interview had just announced that it was suspending its operations. From that premise, Professor Combs posed the question: How did we get to a place where objective reporting is conflated with opinion—and, for the sake of democracy, how do journalists operate in such an environment?

The panelists each noted that while the line between opinion and fact has become blurrier in the eyes of *consumers*, there is still a firm line between the two for journalists. Joel Simon noted that “we used to have a uniform reality” with news reported by a handful of outlets. Today, the media landscape has been fundamentally altered. There are countless sources of information

¹ The Human Security Law Center & Reves Center for International Studies, *Does Media Intimidation Look the Same Everywhere? “Press Freedom Under Attack,”* YOUTUBE (Nov. 4, 2022), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5rQQRll10s0>.

on the Internet, and many now obtain their news from social media outlets such as Twitter and Facebook. In addition, Simon noted that while wealthy business owners have generally always managed traditional news corporations, their business strategies and audiences have changed. In the past, monopolies shielded wealthy owners from competition.

Moreover, when politicians pushed back against inadequate coverage, these owners could afford to hire good lawyers. Today, the way the market functions—highly fragmented and extremely competitive—does not encourage civic-minded news coverage. Simon noted that—at least thus far—figures like Jeff Bezos have been hands-off in their ownership of news outlets. However, President Trump did try to exploit Bezos and his role as an owner. While he was unsuccessful, the attempt itself was concerning. Still, wealthy owners altering coverage to suit their needs is always a concern.

Likewise, Carle-Phillipe Juste described the current media environment as rife with culture wars and the politicization of news itself. The “town hall,” Juste said, is “divided with walls. People do not hear each other anymore.” But while journalists try to be as equitable as possible, people do not see them that way. Furthermore, the business structure of journalism has changed as well. While the *New York Times* used to be a metro newspaper, Simon notes, today it is a global website. As a result of these changes in the media landscape, we are now inundated with a 24/7 news cycle that threatens our democracy. While Juste understands the matrices and how the industry functions today— by attracting as many views to articles as possible rather than selling physical copies — “I do not like the idea,” Juste stated, “that my work is about how many eyeballs I can get on an article...we have sold our soul, our democracy, to the highest bidder.”

While the current media landscape presents numerous challenges to both journalists and democracy itself, Simon was quick to clarify that this period was not a golden age. The uniform

information space excluded so many voices, particularly those voiced by people of color.

Likewise, Juste noted that we could not just go back to the media landscape of the 1970s; we need entirely new solutions. Grady argued that, given its vital role in our society, journalism should be viewed as a social service rather than just an industry.

Moreover, as grim as the state of journalism can feel, the panelists ultimately felt there is still hope. Simon argued that choosing to become a journalist is a sign of optimism. Journalists must believe in people's ability to shape society using information—a fundamentally optimistic belief. But as CPJ director, he feels frustrated by the strategy of only defending individual journalists when the issues journalists face are systematic. Journalism, the panelists argued, should be viewed as a civic institution.

Journalists, Juste stated, must “make ice in hell,” but “we make ice in hell every day... Society can still win this battle—but not with the same template we used in the past. We need to meet people where they are; if they are on Twitter, we need to meet them there. If we don't, we will create a vacuum, and the things that fill that vacuum may not be healthy for us and our democracy.”

As Juste noted toward the end of the panel, the film “Endangered” is a “candle in a very dark time... I just need more candles in that room.” Juste advised aspiring journalists to be curious and patient and engage with people they completely disagree with. The best journalists understand that they have their biases, but their desire to be fair outweighs their personal beliefs. Billionaires are always involved, but it is up to journalists to protect their values. The town hall is now separated and walled into segments; people cannot hear each other. This is where we are right now—but we do not need to stay here. People at Trump rallies would hug me. I refuse the

knee-jerk reaction of seeing them as the “other.” “Press,” Juste noted, “reflects everything we are—our hopes, our sins—and gives us a moment of redemption.”