

Does Media Intimidation Look the Same Everywhere? Stories from Different Parts of the World at the Human Security Law Center's Symposium on Press Freedom Under Attack: 21st-Century Threats to Journalists—and Democracy

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Christopher Tyree, senior director and co-founder of the Virginia Center for Investigative Journalism, led the final panel at this year's Human Security Law Center Symposium, held in partnership with the Reves Center for International Studies and the Virginia Center for Investigative Journalism at WHRO. Joining Tyree were Martin Plaut, a Senior Research Fellow with the Institute of Commonwealth Studies at the University of London and former BBC journalist, and Natalie Southwick, Program Coordinator for the Latin America & Caribbean Division of the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ).¹

Tyree opened the discussion by asking the two esteemed journalists what the theme “journalism as a service to democracy” meant to them and what they have witnessed over the course of their careers. The journalists' responses canvassed three broad topics: (1) Dangers to Journalists; (2) Responses to those Dangers; and (3) Cultivating faith in Journalism.

Plaut has spent more than thirty years reporting in some of the world's most challenging journalistic environments, including the Horn of Africa. Plaut's discussion focused in particular on Eritrea, where the country's ongoing war with Ethiopia has led to the deaths of more than half a million people, mostly civilians. Plaut reported that in Eritrea, there is no press freedom; however, despite the restrictions, information still manages to leak from the area. Plaut praised the bravery of local journalists, whose hard work was often met with resistance, beatings, and, at times, death.

Southwick observed that 2022 has been the deadliest year on record for journalists in Mexico and Haiti, with 13 journalists killed in Mexico and five in Haiti. Southwick also observed that journalists threatened or killed are usually local journalists because they are more vulnerable to regional government powers. Local reporters in Latin America and the Caribbean still use radio to transmit community reporting. In many remote or indigenous communities in Latin America, these radio stations may be the only significant source of information—especially if the locals don't speak Spanish or Portuguese. In addition to risking their lives, Latin American and Caribbean journalists also face threats and imprisonment. The Nicaraguan and Guatemalan governments are just two examples of governments that weaponize their legal systems to sideline and imprison reporters.

Not all threats to journalists involve targeted violence. Plaut noted that journalists are more likely to be killed in common car accidents on poorly maintained roads in Africa and India than from a violent attack. The dangers facing journalists are exacerbated by insufficient resources, leading young journalists to take more risks and cut corners.

¹ The Human Security Law Center & Reves Center for International Studies, *Endangered: Threats Against Journalists in the United States & Abroad*. “Press Freedom Under Attack,” YOUTUBE (Nov. 4, 2022), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M2ITLco2HvM>.

The dangers facing journalists require them to adapt to their circumstances and take appropriate precautions. When covering the Zimbabwe elections in 2018, for instance, Tyree spoke with locals outdoors mainly because he knew he could be a target for violence. Southwick explained that the media intimidation terrain shifts regularly, so frequent risk assessments are essential. She also mentioned that devices can be confiscated in many areas, like Mexico and El Salvador, and communications can be accessed and tracked using Pegasus. These digital threats did not exist ten years ago, so journalists must take account of them. Plaut, for his part, emphasized the importance of rigorous training for journalists who report in dangerous locations. For example, the BBC trains reporters in first aid medical response and safety, which assists them whether they face governmental repression or hazardous roads.

To close out the segment, the panel considered the way in which government tactics and misinformation can undermine the public's faith in traditional news outlets. Tyree observed a slow degradation in trust between reporters and their communities in his native state of Virginia. He went on to note that influential people in the United States demonize journalism and the media. Reporters, therefore, must work harder to gain the public's trust by being more vociferous, more involved with the local community, and more transparent.

Plaut, for his part, compared the reception of journalists in the environments he worked in. In his experience, the BBC "trained" the British public to answer questions from the media, while Plaut described Hong Kong as among his most challenging workplaces. The Chinese government, he claimed, has instilled wariness in the population when answering questions from the media. Yet, in a positive development, Plaut explained that the perception of South African journalists has improved since the end of apartheid. Today, more minor, local, online groups have taken the public audience away from printed newspapers. The people supporting this process, Plaut averred, deserve enormous credit.

Southwick discussed the Nicaraguan government's smear campaign against reporters and its effect on the public's trust in media. She explained that the public trusts local Nicaraguan media more because locals trust their neighbors and feel more comfortable answering questions posed by a reporter they know. Trust in reporters where there is tight state control over information is vital.

Tyree closed the panel discussion by noting that this is an unprecedented time in journalism history. The whole model of journalism—how citizens are reached, how journalism is financed, and how to cooperate to tell meaningful stories—must be rebuilt. While much work remains to be done, the growth of nonprofit newsrooms in the United States is heartening. He encouraged attendees to support local nonprofit organizations and thereby increase awareness about their significance and the overarching value of journalism.