THE UNESCO
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Is journalism old news?

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- **"Fact-checking is like taking a car apart in a workshop"** An interview with Fergus McIntosh, The New Yorker
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OUR GUEST

An interview with **Thelma Golden**, director of the Studio Museum in Harlem (New York)

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THE UNESCO Courier

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Editorial

At a time when anyone can publish, comment on, and share content, the idea of doing without intermediaries can be tempting. Yet it is misleading. An abundance of information guarantees neither its quality nor its accuracy. Social media and digital platforms may offer endless possibilities for documenting events in real time, reaching new audiences, and amplifying marginalized voices but they also pose major challenges to the quality of information and the sustainability of journalism.

During recent conflicts and major political events, the massive circulation of misinformation has shown just how fragile the border between information and manipulation can be. The rise of AI-generated content and "deepfakes", which attribute fictional statements to public figures, tests our collective ability to discern the truth. The challenge is no longer simply to produce information, or even to access it, but to strengthen critical thinking, distinguish the true from the false, the essential from the trivial, and fact from opinion.

This is precisely the role of journalism: to investigate, verify and provide context. Yet the media must have the necessary means to do so. Facing reduced advertising revenue, dwindling audiences and a crisis of trust within public opinion, many newsrooms are struggling to survive. Added to these troubles are the threats directly targeting media professionals. In many parts of the world, journalists are murdered, or subjected to intimidation, unjust prosecution, and violence.

Defending press freedom is not just a concern for media professionals: it is a responsibility for society as a whole. Behind every investigation that exposes injustice, every report that sheds light on a crisis and every fact-check that debunks a rumour, our collective ability to understand the world is at stake. New digital tools and the emerging coalitions of journalists, working together to analyze global events and issues, are pushing the boundaries of intellectual cooperation in the name of truth and the common good.

Independent journalism retains the same basic principles, but the landscape in which it operates has changed profoundly. How can we make sure it endures and reinvents itself? What new skills must be developed for it to serve the common good in the pursuit of truth? We must answer these questions urgently to maintain a public sphere grounded in verified facts and informed debate.

Agnès Bardon
Editor-in-Chief

Is journalism old news?

© Antonio Rodríguez / Cartoon Movement

Walk the line between truth and lies, *a drawing by Mexican painter and illustrator Antonio Rodríguez.*

Nic Newman

Senior Research Associate at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford University (United Kingdom), he was lead author of the Digital News Report 2012-2025. *He is also the author of an annual report on journalism, media and technology trends.*

At a time when the boundaries between information, entertainment, and opinion are becoming increasingly blurred, the future of journalism may ultimately lie in what makes it unique: the ability to help societies understand themselves through reliable, responsible, and meaningful storytelling.

Across the world, traditional media outlets are struggling. Artificial intelligence (AI) is changing the way people search for and discover information while social platforms are prioritizing entertainment and personality-driven content over institutional news.

Audiences are fragmenting, trust is under strain, and many journalists face increasing economic insecurity. At the same time, misinformation and disinformation are spreading faster than ever, amplified by algorithms primarily designed to maximize engagement. In this increasingly crowded and confusing information environment, journalism itself is being squeezed from multiple directions.

Yet paradoxically, in a world shaped by geopolitical instability, climate change, war, migration, and economic uncertainty, the need for trustworthy information is greater than ever as citizens seek to understand events and make informed decisions. The challenge for journalism today is not simply to survive technological change, but to adapt in ways that preserve its core values.

The loosening grip

One of the clearest trends of the past decade has been the decline in consumption of traditional news media, especially among younger audiences. Television news audiences are ageing rapidly, print newspapers continue to decline, and even digital news websites are struggling to retain users. Increasingly, people access news indirectly through social media platforms, video networks, messaging apps, news aggregators pulling together content from multiple sources into a single interface, and AI-powered answer engines.

According to the 2025 *Reuters Institute Digital News Report*, the proportion of audiences that accessed news via social media overtook television for the first time in the United States. Across the world, almost half of under-25s now say social media is their main source of news — and these trends are particularly pronounced in Africa, Latin America and parts of Asia.

> **“Content creators, podcasters, YouTubers, streamers, and influencers have become powerful voices**

At the same time, generative AI tools are beginning to transform information discovery. These systems can summarize and synthesize information directly within chat and search interfaces, leaving less reason for information seekers to click further. Publishers, who have long depended on traffic from search engines and social platforms to attract audiences and advertising revenue, expect to lose almost half their traffic in the next few years according to the 2026 *Reuters Institute Digital Trends survey*.

News avoidance

These developments come at a time when the news industry is already struggling to capture attention in an environment of super-abundant information, entertainment and many other distractions besides. In this “attention economy”, news competes not only with other journalism, but with creators, influencers, streamers, podcasters, and personalized feeds designed to maximize engagement.

Perhaps as a result, many people are becoming less interested in traditional news and politics altogether. Research from the 2025 *Reuters Institute Digital News Report* shows that across countries, four in ten people say they sometimes or often *avoid the news* — up from 29 per cent in 2017. They say the news often leaves them feeling powerless, exhausted, anxious, or overwhelmed. Others complain that news coverage feels repetitive, excessively negative, or disconnected from their daily lives. This disengagement creates risks not only for journalism, but for democracy itself. When citizens withdraw from public information, they may become more vulnerable to manipulation, conspiracy theories, and polarising narratives.

Falling levels of trust

For decades, news organizations built authority around the power of institutional brands and clear editorial standards. But in many of the world’s most populous countries trust in them has been falling. Today many audiences — especially younger users — increasingly place trust in individuals rather than institutions. Content creators, podcasters, YouTubers, streamers, and influencers have become powerful voices in the public sphere.

Some of these creators produce valuable explanatory journalism and reach audiences that traditional media often struggle to connect with. Others special- →

ize in commentary, activism, or partisan opinion. Unlike traditional journalists, they are rarely bound by editorial codes, transparency requirements, or obligations of balance and verification. The boundaries between journalism, entertainment, and opinion are becoming increasingly blurred.

This "creator economy" is being accelerated by changes in platform design. Social media is becoming less social and more algorithmic. Increasingly, users are shown content not from friends and family, but from creators selected by AI recommendation systems. Personality-driven content often performs better than institutional reporting because it is more entertaining, but also because it *feels* more authentic, and relatable.

Traditional publishers are responding in different ways. Some are investing more heavily in podcasts, newsletters, video explainers, and personality-led journalism. Others are encouraging reporters to build stronger direct relationships with audiences across multiple platforms. News organisations that once downplayed individual journalists in favour of institutional voice, such as the British weekly journal *The Economist*, are increasingly placing faces, personalities, and human storytelling at the centre of their strategies.

Deepfakes and synthetic voices

Another growing concern is the spread of misinformation and disinformation. Our *Digital News Report* survey shows that public anxiety about false and misleading content online has been rising over time. Over half (58 per cent) of survey respondents say they find it difficult to distinguish between what is true or fake online when it comes to news.

Now generative AI threatens to intensify this challenge by dramatically lowering the cost of producing convincing fake text, images, audio, and video. Deepfakes, synthetic voices, and AI-generated propaganda are already appearing in political campaigns and conflicts around the world. But perhaps the greater danger lies in volume. The internet risks being flooded with low-quality, sensational, or misleading content. If citizens no longer know what sources to trust, the authority of professional reporting may weaken further.

At the same time, attacks on journalists and independent media have intensified in many countries. Many journalists face declining pay, job insecurity, shrinking newsrooms, and growing harassment online. Local journalism in particular has been weakened; in many regions, news deserts are expanding as smaller outlets close or reduce coverage.

New formats

And yet despite all these pressures, the news industry has shown that it is able and willing to adapt. Many news organizations recognize that survival will depend on focusing on what journalism uniquely provides. Across countries, people consistently say in surveys that they want journalism that is accurate, impartial, transparent, and distinctive. They are looking for reporting that explains complex issues clearly, helps them navigate uncertainty, and provides trustworthy information they cannot easily find elsewhere.

> **"Almost half of under-25s now say social media is their main source of news**

Younger audiences increasingly prefer video, audio, and visual forms of explanation. Podcasts in particular have emerged as an important space for nuance, depth, and intimacy at a time when much online communication feels fast, fragmented, and polarized. Video journalism, newsletters, interactive formats, and multimodal storytelling can help journalism become more engaging without sacrificing substance.

Another important shift is towards more audience-centred journalism. Many media outlets are experimenting with formats like explanatory journalism, solutions-focused reporting, and community-driven approaches. Coverage of issues such as climate change, for example, may need to move towards clearer explanation, practical relevance, and evidence-based solutions.

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Live coverage from a demonstration in Paris (France), 2023.

Freedom of expression under increasing threat

Freedom of expression is declining sharply worldwide. This is the alarming finding of the *UNESCO report on world trends in freedom of expression and media development 2022-2025*, released in December 2025. It reveals a 10 per cent global decline in freedom of expression since 2012, a level not reached in decades.

First finding: during the period studied (2022-2025), 186 journalists were killed while covering conflict zones, a 67 per cent increase compared to the previous period (2018-2021).

Every day journalists face an ever-widening spectrum of attacks, whether physical, digital or legal. Some are subjected to threats that oblige them to flee their homes: since 2018, more than 900 journalists in Latin America and the Caribbean have been forced into exile.

Online harassment against journalists, particularly targeting women, has escalated around the world. A study conducted by the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) for UN Women, in partnership with UNESCO, revealed that 75 per cent of women journalists and media workers were victims of online violence in 2025.

Another prime target: environmental journalists, who are now at greater risk; UNESCO recorded 749 attacks against journalists covering environmental issues between 2009 and 2023.

Despite international commitments to end impunity, prosecutions remain rare. While modest progress has been made — the impunity rate fell from 95 per cent in 2012 to 85 per cent in 2024 — most perpetrators of these crimes remain unpunished.

But while freedom of expression is increasingly under threat, the UNESCO report notes that significant progress has been made regarding access to information. Between 2020 and 2025, an additional 1.5 billion people obtained access to social media and messaging platforms.

During the same period, collaborative investigative journalism gained momentum, leading to an increase in the number of major cross-border investigations. Fact-checking teams have been strengthened in many media outlets.

In addition, laws recognizing community media are proliferating globally, thereby helping to preserve a vital source of reliable local information.

To reverse negative trends and strengthen freedom of expression, the report's authors encourage governments to protect and invest in journalism, promote transparency in the digital sphere, and develop media and information literacy.

Yet another notable trend has been an increasing number of cross-border journalistic collaborations. As many of the issues shaping public life become international in nature, news organisations are increasingly working together on investigations that no single newsroom could easily undertake alone. Networks such as the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), and the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) have coordinated reporting on crime, environmental issues, and disinformation across multiple countries.

Groups such as the Netherlands-based Bellingcat have pioneered open-source fact checking and investigations combining professional oversight with a network of volunteers and citizen journalists. Such collaborations can extend the reach of public-interest journalism at a time when many individual news organisations face significant economic and political pressures.

Some publishers are also rediscovering the value of slower, more reflective journalism. The British daily newspapers *The Guardian* and *The Financial Times* have substantially reduced their story count without damaging engagement. The Danish slow news site *Zetland* has expanded its footprint with local offshoots in Finland and Norway.

Artificial intelligence may also offer solutions, helping journalists analyze data, personalize formats, translate content, and automate routine production tasks. Used responsibly, these technologies could free journalists for original investigations and human storytelling. But doing so will require clear ethical standards, transparency, editorial oversight, and public accountability.

Ultimately, the future of journalism may depend less on technology itself than on whether news organisations can rebuild relationships of trust with audiences. News organizations remain amongst the few institutions dedicated to verifying information in the public interest. In a polarized and fragmented information ecosystem, that role becomes even more important. New fact-checking and verification brands are being set up, such as *BBC Verify*, which aim to show the audience more of the process. Open-source investigation methodologies are also showing how transparency can build trust.

The current crisis facing journalism is therefore not only a story of decline. It is also a story of transition. The forms, formats, and business models of journalism are changing rapidly, but the fundamental need for trustworthy information has not disappeared. If journalism can adapt to new technologies while staying true to its core principles — accuracy, fairness, transparency, and independence — it still has the capacity to reinvent itself for a new generation. ■

Interview by
Anuliina Savolainen
UNESCO

Fergus McIntosh: "Fact-checking is like taking a car apart in a workshop"

In a media landscape riddled with disinformation, where tracing information back to its source has become difficult, fact-checking by editorial teams is vital. Few know the stakes of this essential work better than Fergus McIntosh, the head research editor running the historic fact-checking department at the American weekly magazine *The New Yorker*.

How would you define fact-checking?

I see editorial fact-checking as a practice where we take stories apart, like a car in a workshop, looking at every single component, polishing it, making sure it runs, putting it all back together again and making sure the end result is accurate, balanced, compelling, has the right sort of context, and is the best that it can be.

The New Yorker*'s legendary fact-checking department was established nearly a century ago. Can you tell us more about its origins and current setup?*

In 1927 the magazine published a profile of the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay, a huge star in the 1920s, and in the opening paragraph there were, it seems, a number of real howlers. One of them was that her father was a dockworker whereas in reality, he was a schoolteacher. The poet's mother got in touch to complain, and the founding editor realized that he and his staff needed to get more serious about the facts. So, it can be said that it was an angry mother who first established *The New Yorker*'s fact checking department!

The department was further reinforced in the 1980s and 1990s when the magazine became much more serious and started to publish very long reported pieces, often running across multiple issues. During that period, one of the magazine's best and most famous writers was also dragged through ten years of legal proceedings on an allegation of fabricated quotes. It's partly because of that case that we require writers to submit all related materials, such as recordings, notes, photographs, and interview transcripts, to the magazine.

> **"We check it all — features, news pieces, criticism, and beyond**

Nowadays, there are 29 people in the department. We still check the print magazine, which comes out almost every week of the year, but *The New Yorker* now publishes as much online-only content as it does in print. So, we fact-check all of that — the features, news pieces, criticism, and so on — and we check the radio show, the podcasts, humour pieces, cartoons and covers. We even fact-check the fiction!

Can you describe a typical day in the life of a fact-checker?

It can be very varied. We do a lot of independent research, but we also work with the writers' materials to verify them and ensure that the writer has understood everything correctly and has been accurate with details. We also ask questions like: Does the argument make sense? Is the overall point of the piece justified?

For example, you might spend several weeks in a row working on a big investigative piece, verifying things with the writer or calling sources to check how and from whom they'd heard about this thing that they had told the writer about; you might want to speak to those sources as well. You might spend all day wading through a bunch of scientific papers about a particular discovery that we're writing about. So, those big investigative pieces can go in all sorts of different directions, but the basics remain the same: reporting, further research, and editing.

Fact-checking pieces for the daily news section moves much more quickly; you might get a draft in the morning and have it closed by the end of the day. For a music review, you might spend part of your day listening to a new album just

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to ensure the lyrics are correctly transcribed and there are no errors in the tracklist references.

My favorite bit of a fact-checker's day is when you're closing a big piece. Say you've been working on a 10,000-word story for three weeks, and on the last day you sit down with the writer, the editor, the copy editor, and the fact-checkers. You've got it to a point where you think this is ready to be published and then you all sit down and look at it again together and there's always something that you find — and that's so satisfying.

The work of a fact-checker takes place largely behind the scenes.

Let's imagine for a moment that all of this 'invisible' work ceased to exist: what would a world without fact-checking look like?

In fact, the work isn't invisible; the work is in the story. It's just not necessarily distinguished from the work of the writer or of the institution. The work is indeed most visible in its failures, which are errors, and everyone hates an error. It's a very strong principle of ours that we correct errors transparently and so should everyone who sees them.

Essentially, fact-checking is a huge part of the editorial labour that makes stories better. If we want stories that show us the world as it is, but we get the small things wrong, then the big things might be wrong as well. The larger sense of a piece is built of small details. Those individual facts build up to make the larger beliefs and ideas that power stories — and, often, power our society.

So, without fact-checking, the quality of the stories that you're reading would decline, and their depth and impact would be reduced. There would be a commercial problem for media companies in the sense that their product would be less valuable. It would be less interesting, less appealing, less influential. There would also be a lot of legal →

> **Rigorous fact-checking remains one of the best possible ways to detect whether content is AI-generated**

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The cover of The New Yorker *from February 2020, featuring Behind the Lens, a work by the French artist Malika Favre.*

problems. And, in the case of newspapers, national broadcasters, and local media in particular, we would be failing to provide people with essential information that helps them make important decisions.

If you consider media in the sense of the Fourth Estate, as a counterbalance to the big centres of power — this becomes much less effective if you're getting things wrong. The power that journalists have is in being trusted, is in being believed. So, if we stop making our best effort to get it right, why would anyone trust us? And if no one trusts us, how can we perform that role of holding power to account?

What are the challenges of guaranteeing veracity in today's media landscape where content is increasingly shaped and disseminated via algorithms and generative AI? How have* The New Yorker*'s practices evolved to adapt to these realities?

There are already ways in which our fact-checking work is being affected by AI, and I'm sure that it will also be enhanced by AI, but I definitely don't see it being supplanted.

We're fortunate that our process is people-focused: if somebody is mentioned in a piece, we try to get in touch with them instead of just drawing things from secondary sources. The people I work with spend a lot of time on the phone. I think that has actually been very protective to us over these first few years. I hope that our fundamental principle of engaging directly with the people involved and getting to primary sources will remain the same.

However, now it's not that hard to spoof a voice with AI. We need to be attentive to this and learn to use the technological solutions that will come along. AI-generated content spilling across the internet is another challenge. If you want to say with confidence that what you're publishing is true, you can't just rely on a black box without knowing how it reached its conclusion; that's an editorial dead end. You have to force yourself to click through to the sources and read the original links. Even then, an increasing amount of that content is AI-generated, creating a hall-of-mirrors effect as you hunt for the true source.

Fortunately, fact-checkers are well-equipped for this challenge because evaluating source quality is exactly what we do. I also believe that rigorous fact-checking remains one of the best possible ways to detect whether content submitted by writers is AI-generated.

It's an interesting time, as people much more broadly are having to think about the very things that fact-checkers and reporters have long thought about. Today, people are far more vulnerable to being fooled by unreliable sources. On one hand, this can lead to a sort of cynicism — a 'we can't know anything', 'post-truth era' sort of discourse. But there's also a more optimistic scenario where people start taking responsibility for their information, becoming aware that while they can't necessarily trust everything they see, they need to make active decisions on what to trust. I lean towards the latter, and I want to work towards it, too.

An interesting trend I've noticed is a broader push to show the real journalists behind the work. It's a very promising approach that can also act as a counterbalance in the AI era; after all, trust is a human-to-human thing. As an example, at *The New Yorker* the writers of big investigation stories are usually invited to a studio to talk about their work. It's not only for publicity, but to show the audience who the person is and what the process was like. ■

Tiago Dias

Journalist in Porto (Portugal)

Beyond the babble: Portugal's podcast adventure

Where traditional print circulation has been losing its foothold, audio storytelling has emerged to capture audiences old and new.

The windows of *Público*'s studio, looking out over the Tagus River, offer one of the most beautiful views of Lisbon. Inside the small cubicle set up within the Portuguese daily's newsroom, silence awaits the arrival of the next journalist and their interviewees.

Ruben Martins was hired less than ten years ago, fresh out of university, to jumpstart *Público*'s audio strategy. He checks out the day's schedule, which features an interview with singer Bárbara Tinoco, and a visit from retired football player Augusto Inácio to discuss an upcoming World Cup-themed series.

> **"Podcasts are a way to reach new audiences**

Founded in 1989, *Público* was launched as a newspaper that would be innovative on the editorial and technological levels. Yet despite decades in print, the newspaper has not been spared by a media crisis that has hit Portugal harder than any of its neighbors. Today, only 10 per cent of the Portuguese are willing to pay for news, compared to a global average of 17 per cent. *Público*'s daily circulation reflects this, with a decrease from 33,000 copies initially to some 9,000 in 2025. By contrast, its digital circulation is the highest in the country at around 55,000.

Although print media is in decline, the Portuguese public has a particularly strong appetite for podcasts, as reflected in the 2025 *Digital News Report*, from Oxford University's Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. In January 2025 alone, Portuguese listeners downloaded 12.8 million podcast episodes.

Media expert and researcher Miguel Paisana from University Institute of Lisbon (ISCTE) confirms this trend: "Podcasts reach all of Portuguese society, across all age groups. At first, they were a growing phenomenon within the 18-24 age group, but now they have been significantly adopted even among over 65-year-olds."

"A gateway to journalism"

In 2017, when podcasts were already a staple in legacy media circles, *Público* released its first podcast, titled P24. Two years later it became a daily product. With a four-person core team of two journalists, two sound designers, and a wide array of occasional participants from the entire newsroom, *Público* now releases audio content on both general news and specialized topics such as national and international politics, film criticism, wine, books, and parenting.

"We feel we're a gateway for journalism among a younger generation. There are people with no contact with the newspaper, in print or digitally, but who are very fond of the fact that they were able to have a reporter telling them what was going on in the world or what the main stories of the day were," Ruben Martins says.

The ambition, according to the journalist, is to translate *Público*'s content into audio while maintaining the high standards characteristic of its articles. "We have a podcast about trains, hosted by one of our reporters, Carlos Cipriano, who is highly specialized in the topic, and it felt like a waste not to use his knowledge to reach an interesting niche community. The podcast is tailor-made for them." It appears that the community of listeners forwards their complaints to the podcast hosts as if they were the train company's ombudsman; they know there are people from the company listening in on the show.

"That sort of relationship, which doesn't happen in print journalism in the same way, means we can toy with the possibilities without losing our journalistic rigour," Ruben Martins says. "We tend to simplify language, to establish a more intense relationship with those on the other side. Because, in the end, we're speaking directly into someone's ears. And that magic that is created between those who produce and those who listen is terrific."

Entertainment-led boom

Two of the main Portuguese media — *Expresso* and *Observador* — have also strongly invested in podcasts. →

However, the podcast boom does not necessarily benefit the news. Less than 1 in 10 Portuguese polled for the latest Digital News Report mentioned news podcasts as a source of information. According to an audited podcast ranking in Portugal (Marktest), in March 2026 six of the top 10 podcasts were categorized as "comedy".

The public's lack of interest in the press seems to be taking a heavy toll on the journalists themselves. In a media landscape where, according to the *2023 National Survey on the Living and Working Conditions of Journalists in Portugal*, almost half of the journalists report "high levels of burnout" and almost two thirds said they have considered leaving the job. In search of alternatives, some are turning to smaller, independent media initiatives.

These include ambitious projects of investigative and narrative audio journalism like *Divergente* and *Fumaça*. While both are funded by audience contributions and grants, *Fumaça* focuses on investigative journalism podcasts, whereas *Divergente* also produces visual formats, including documentaries. Their stories are developed during months, and cover topics ranging from the Portuguese prison system to a deep dive into what leads someone to set a field on fire.

> **In January 2025, Portuguese listeners downloaded 12.8 million podcast episodes**

While podcasts represent a promising opportunity, they operate in an environment that has become highly competitive. An innovative approach, high-quality storytelling, and a significant investment in production are key factors in the success of an audio programme. Not to mention the personal touch, which is essential when speaking directly to listeners' ears. "The host is key," sums up Miguel Paisana. ■

Protecting safety of journalists around the world

Journalism is fundamental for sustainable development, human rights protection and democratic consolidation, but it remains a deadly profession — almost nine out of ten journalist killings go unresolved, not to mention the cases of enforced disappearances, arbitrary detentions and other non-lethal attacks.

Journalists are facing an ever-wider range of threats, including physical, digital, and legal attacks. Women journalists face rising gender-specific threats and journalists working in conflict settings face heightened risks, including mental and psychosocial challenges.

In response, UNESCO strives to combat gender-based violence through the promotion of human rights-based digital governance and by supporting research and global consultations on women in media. UNESCO collaborates with newsrooms to develop gender-sensitive safety protocols.

Over the past decade, since the creation of the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity, coordinated by UNESCO, more than 50 mechanisms for the protection of journalists have been established. UNESCO has also engaged and sensitized more than 50,000 judges, prosecutors, and law enforcement officers; and it has supported thousands of lawyers in the defense of more than 9,000 journalists worldwide.

In conflict settings, UNESCO supports journalist training, protection and mental health, including media and safe spaces in conflict areas and for journalists in exile.

Under the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists, UNESCO continues to address this issue by focussing on raising awareness, supporting standard setting and policy development, monitoring and reporting on violations, as well as reinforcing stakeholder capacities, research, and coalition building.

◥ *Podcast producer Ruben Martins in the recording studio of the Portuguese newspaper* Público *in Lisbon.*

© Estela Silva

Radio on the frontlines in times of crisis

In times of crisis, whether epidemics, natural hazards, or armed conflicts, the media plays a vital role as a primary source of humanitarian and life-saving information. It is crucial not only that journalists can continue their work during disasters and conflicts, but also that their reporting remains independent, accurate, and professional.

Beyond its rapid-response initiatives to protect journalists during acute crises — including via protective equipment, psychosocial and legal support, and emergency infrastructure — UNESCO fosters the long-term capacity and resilience of media outlets in crisis-affected regions and areas vulnerable to environmental disasters.

Because radio is often the main source of information in crisis and post-crisis situations, UNESCO's efforts have heavily focused on supporting community radio stations in challenging environments, from Afghanistan to South Sudan, from Nepal to Zimbabwe, just to name a few.

Media institutions are equally vital for prevention and preparedness, including early warning systems. Journalists are central actors in climate action and disaster readiness. The Organization has trained local and regional media in Small Island Developing States (SIDS) to utilize geospatial data and AI tools to enhance reporting on environmental risks.

To help media and journalists worldwide better withstand disasters, UNESCO has developed a *Model Disaster Preparedness and Response Plan for Media Institutions* (2025).

Franz Krüger

Associate professor at NLA Høgskolen in Norway, research associate at the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa and president of the African Journalism Education Network (Ajen).

Upskilling the next generation of journalists

As traditional media grapples with crisis, journalism schools are adapting, but broader university reforms struggle to keep up with the frantic rhythm of technological shifts.

The rise of digital media has been a game-changer for journalism. The migration of advertising revenues to major platforms has triggered an economic crisis for traditional media, leading to widespread newspaper closures and extensive job losses. At the same time, misinformation is gaining ground, fueling a crisis of trust that impacts the entire profession.

The implications for journalism teaching are significant. Around the world, teaching institutions are looking for new ways to prepare future graduates for a world where new media forms dominate and where traditional, stable jobs have become harder to find.

The need for new technical skills is clear, and consequently, most schools are extending the range of tools that students are introduced to. It is not always easy. University processes of curricular change are ponderous, while technical innovations appear at breakneck speed — and some disappear just as quickly.

New formats

Nevertheless, schools are finding ways to adapt. Podcasts, short-form videos and social media campaigns are just some of the new formats being taught. Students at the school of journalism at Cardiff University in Wales (United Kingdom) are now being trained to use "a variety of software to produce graphic outputs, blogs, apps, and social media campaigns".

While the mastery of technical skills is necessary, the emphasis is on narrative and effective storytelling. The journalism school at Thomas More University in Mechelen, Belgium, recruits students by asking questions like: "Do you have a story to tell? Do you need your voice to be heard? Do you want to add some humanity to the often brutal world we live in?"

> **Journalism schools in Africa face significant infrastructural constraints**

Though tools are becoming cheaper, journalism schools in poorer countries face significant infrastructural constraints. Ghana journalism educator Richmond Acheampong points to the deficit in digital infrastructure faced by much of Africa. Journalism "relies on cloud collaboration, mobile production, live verification, remote research, analytics, digital publishing and increasingly data-rich workflows that assume reliable connectivity. A faculty cannot seriously train students for those realities if bandwidth is unstable, costly or absent."

Practical work, which has long been an important part of journalism education through campus newspapers, radio and sometimes even TV broadcasting, is also changing. Rhodes University in Makhanda, South Africa, owns the local newspaper, *Grocott's Mail,* and has long used it for experiential learning. The digital change has brought an end to print publishing, and the publication is now distributed as a pdf newspaper, through newsletters, and via Facebook and other digital channels. The shift has opened new access to a digital information ecosystem allowing greater two-way interaction with residents and audiences.

Precarity

To remain relevant, journalism schools need also to maintain close and ongoing consultation with industry. A participative, Pan-African UNESCO project designed to develop criteria for excellence in journalism education in Africa is one example of this approach. In 2023, online consultations brought together around 100 journalism teachers from across Africa to discuss their challenges. In a similar vein, the African Journalism Education Network (Ajen) has built direct discussion with industry representatives and practitioners into its regular annual round table meetings, which have been held in Johannesburg, Kigali, Nairobi, and Accra, with the 2026 event scheduled for Mauritius.

More fundamentally, students have to be prepared for what Dutch academ-

> **Journalism students have to be prepared for "post-industrial, entrepreneurial and atypical" work**

© School of Journalism and Media Studies, Rhodes University

ics Mark Deuze and Tamara Witschge have called "post-industrial, entrepreneurial and atypical" work. They have to have the skills to operate as freelancers in a world of gigs and small start-ups. Initiatives like the Innovation Center at the Aga Khan University's Graduate School of Media and Communication in Nairobi, Kenya, support and incubate such entrepreneurialism by supporting startups.

Though precarity has been noted as a new challenge for journalism in the Global North, it has long been a feature of journalistic work in Africa and other parts of the Global South. African experiences may well be instructive for the media elsewhere.

Looking ahead, it's important for journalism schools to look beyond the traditional function of teaching young people, and consider the new actors doing forms of journalistic work who need the old skills of research, verification and storytelling. Openness to new audiences offers fresh opportunities and is part of the necessary transformation of journalism schools. ■

Cover of Grocott's Mail, *a newspaper operated by Rhodes University in Makhanda (South Africa). The May 22 issue pays tribute to a local women's football club.*

Why I chose to study journalism

The context may be challenging and the future uncertain, but Kamiel Vermeulen remains optimistic. The 26-year-old journalist from Amsterdam (the Netherlands) recently completed a master's degree in journalism and is convinced that the profession has a bright future ahead.

© Anne Sandager

Kamiel Vermeulen filming a news report on the Polish parliamentary elections of October 2023 at the Polish Embassy in Paris (France).

Tell someone you study journalism and you'll probably get a slightly concerned "oh" in return, often accompanied by a subtle frown.

I hate to admit it, but I get it. Artificial intelligence (AI) is hot and journalism is not. With large language models capable of writing multiple paragraphs in a matter of seconds, who needs traditional journalists anymore? Bluntly put: why study journalism?

> **"An AI model won't meet with a confidential source in a dark parking lot. That requires a human**

I recently graduated with a Joint Master degree in Journalism and International Affairs from the Paris School of International Affairs, guided by a lifelong conviction that journalism means the world. Without it, how would we form our ideas and opinions? I have always been fascinated by the thought that every person walking down the street carries a unique worldview and that this worldview largely stems from journalism.

Information as a public good

Pluralistic and independent journalism — which prioritizes the public interest over political, commercial or partisan agendas — is today severely undermined by the crisis in traditional revenue streams, and particularly by dwindling advertising income. In an ever more competitive and fragmented milieu, news production is less and less able to ensure the economic viability of media outlets.

Yet this viability is crucial to guaranteeing information as a common good, as stated in the Windhoek+30 Declaration, adopted on World Press Freedom Day 2021 by UNESCO Member States. The Declaration further underlines the importance of transparency for digital platforms and the need to boost media literacy.

To guarantee the production and dissemination of reliable information, particularly through its International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC), UNESCO is working to support policymakers and media stakeholders in this transition toward new economic models.

This transition involves working directly with the media to diversify their revenue streams, and with national authorities to implement public policies that support an independent media sector serving the public interest. It also means engaging in dialogue with digital platforms to promote more equitable remuneration mechanisms.

> **With misinformation on the rise, I see a new reason for the public to turn back to professional journalism**

An obvious choice

Perhaps journalism also felt like a natural choice because I grew up with a father who reads the newspaper every morning from front to back and a mother who watches the news every night at 8 p.m. On top of that, I have always enjoyed writing.

In the years leading up to my decision, more and more people already flocked to social media for their snack-sized news. Then, just two months before my application deadline for the master's degree, ChatGPT came out. "All writers will be replaced" was the overwhelming sentiment in the air at the time.

Still, I went for it. A robot might be able to write a compelling piece about a major car crash, I thought, but how would it even know that the crash occurred if no one fed it the information? An AI model won't meet with a confidential source in a dark parking lot, either. That requires a human.

When I entered journalism school, however, I was far from aware of the dangers a journalist can face. With world press freedom at a 25-year low and journalists being deliberately targeted — women in particular — it is only understandable that people are discouraged from pursuing a career in journalism.

Immersive journalism

Regardless, I started my master's in journalism in Paris. In our very first week, we were introduced to open-source investigation, using publicly available data to fact-check and verify information. It is a field that is expanding rapidly with the rise of AI-generated mis- and disinformation.

During the semesters that followed, we dived into data journalism, podcasting, social media formats, climate change coverage, conflict reporting, freelancing, and the intersection of journalism and AI — alongside traditional courses in writing, interviewing, and shooting TV reports.

The most immersive course we took was called On the Ground and Local Journalism, for which every student was assigned a town outside of Paris where we would act as a foreign correspondent for the rest of the semester. Establishing yourself in a new place and building up a network of sources to capture local stories isn't easy, but along the way it becomes fun. And it's not something I see a robot doing anytime soon.

Deepfakes and misinformation

It also felt good to sit in a classroom surrounded by peers who chose this path simply because they care about journalism. What's more, it's a profession that allows you to explore many different topics, which makes the job extremely diverse.

It is clear that the overwhelming volume of content on social media platforms further complicates the work of journalists. But today, with so much mis- and disinformation spreading online — whether it's political deepfakes or plane crashes that never happened — I suddenly see a new reason for the public to turn to professional media houses again. Though never 100 per cent foolproof, they are the only ones capable of guaranteeing verified and reliable content.

Public perception can change quickly, and I wouldn't be surprised if a few years from now, when someone says "I study journalism," people's eyebrows shoot up in excitement instead of plunging into a frown. ■

Guy Berger

Emeritus Professor specializing in media and Internet policy issues, he is a retired Director of the Division of Freedom of Expression and Media Development at UNESCO.

Quality information, an endangered public good

In a world where it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish between reliable news and falsehoods, urgent action is needed to defend the right to trustworthy information.

"Information integrity" has become a buzzphrase of our times — and for a good reason. The concept has its roots in a global movement to shape a quality information environment. It all started in 1991, with a UNESCO convening of African editors in the then newly independent Namibia. The media actors at the event crafted the Windhoek Declaration on Promoting an Independent and Pluralistic African Press, later endorsed by the UNESCO General Conference.

The participating editors — two of whom were freed from jail specifically to attend — knew what happens when the public is deprived of effective information. They had learned firsthand how censorship damages democracy's potential for peaceful conflict resolution. They had witnessed close-up how misinformed national decisions deform paths to national development. From their Declaration, a powerful international norm came into being: that press freedom is a right to be cherished.

A fast-looming crisis

The underpinning rationale is that free and professional journalism delivers absolutely essential oxygen into the communications ecology, by exposing corruption, spotlighting human rights abuses, enabling informed voting, sounding the alarm on climate change, promoting peace, and combatting discrimination. It's for this reason that the United Nations General Assembly recognized World Press Freedom Day, celebrated every 3 May.

Journalism adds uniquely distinctive value to society. Especially in today's context where quality information is overshadowed by mounting volumes of entertainment, commercial content, and those viral public "bads" known as disinformation, misinformation and malinformation.

We know why this is happening. Behemoth companies have monopolized massive audiences and the lion's share of advertising revenue, while demonstrating a declining regard for information integrity. Media ventures, for their part, are left with dwindling funds, while algorithms penalize the vis-

The Cano Prize: rewarding courage

Created in 1997, the UNESCO/Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize is awarded annually to a person, organization, or institution that has made an exceptional contribution to the defence or promotion of press freedom anywhere in the world, particularly when this contribution has been made with courage in the face of danger.

In 2026, it was awarded to the Sudanese Journalists Syndicate in recognition of the role the collective has played in condemning the deliberate targeting of journalists in the country's ongoing conflict. The list of previous laureates includes the historic Nicaraguan media outlet *La Prensa* (2025), Palestinian journalists covering Gaza (2024), three imprisoned Iranian female journalists – Niloofar Hamedi, Elaheh Mohammadi, and Narges Mohammadi (2023), the Belarusian Association of Journalists (2022), and Philippine investigative journalist Maria Ressa (2021).

The Prize is named after Guillermo Cano Isaza, a Colombian journalist who was assassinated on 17 December 1986 in Bogotá, Colombia, in front of the offices of his newspaper *El Espectador*. His commitment and the circumstances of his death symbolize the price paid by journalists worldwide for exercising their profession.

ibility of news content on social media. Simultaneously, AI companies take journalists' work without credit or compensation. The result is a fast-looming crisis.

Misleading content

This scenario prompted a second UNESCO meeting in Namibia in 2021 — three decades on. There, the Windhoek+30 Declaration sent out an SOS, strongly proclaiming information to be a public good to which everyone is entitled.

The public good in question is information *with integrity*, a concept entirely antithetical to lies and deceit. This trustworthy information stands as the polar opposite of falsehoods that violate the rights to dignity, privacy and public health. It contrasts directly with untruths in the service of fraud and scams, and even more so with those fuelling hatred, intimidation, incitement, and war.

> **Non-dominant languages and knowledge systems remain marginalized**

Yet, information integrity is under siege. The 2025 *UNESCO World Trends Report* reveals that many media houses are captured by special interests while authoritarian rulers are suppressing journalists and other truth-tellers.

Exacerbating these problems is hype-driven generative AI. Based on probabilities from massive data sets, it is used to extrude highly plausible content in text, image and audio that adds to the confusion. While fake human interfaces are built to sound highly convincing, the accuracy and reliability of their outputs remain intrinsically hit-and-miss affairs. There is scant discrimination between the high-quality, low-quality, and no-quality data feeding these synthetic results. Furthermore, non-dominant languages and knowledge systems are still absent from the generated outputs.

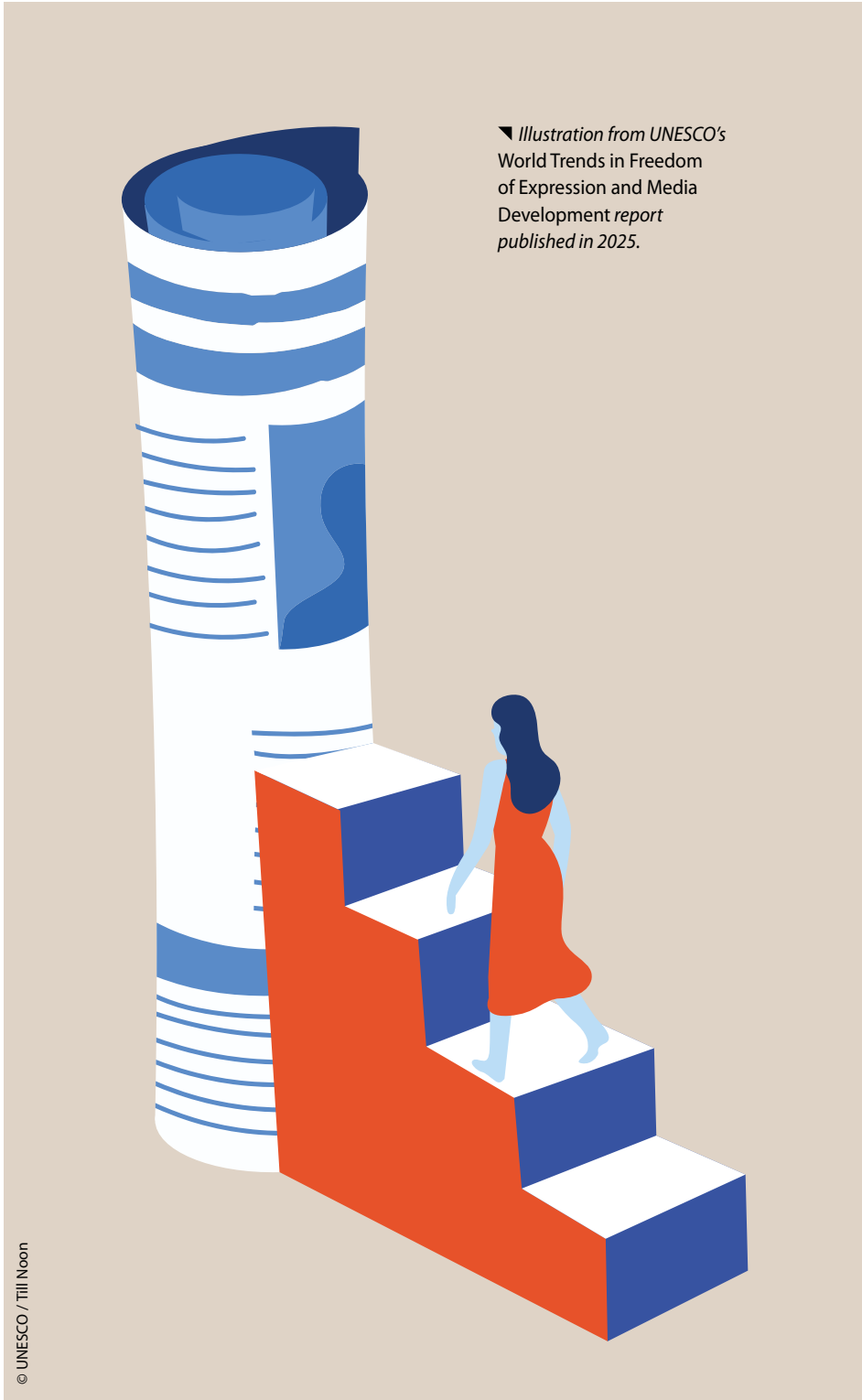

Illustration from UNESCO's World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development *report published in 2025.*

© UNESCO / Till Noon

Making matters worse, governments and influential "broligarchs" behind technology businesses are manipulating AI-generated information in the service of narrow ideologies. This informational darkness is nothing less than an existential challenge for humanity. It has the power to jeopardize individual decision-making in a global society where no one knows what's really true.

Call for transparency

Against these odds, can anything be done for the cause of information with integrity — and to ensure it remains →

affordable and accessible? The policy brief on *Information Integrity on Digital Platforms* released by UN Secretary-General António Guterres in June 2023 calls for policies favouring independent, free and pluralistic journalism. It demands transparency from the tech companies that play such a significant role in harming information integrity. In addition, United Nations resolutions call for solutions to build societal resilience through media and information literacy alongside cross-country co-operation.

Implementing these directions will require full respect for freedom of expression and support for journalism against political and economic predation. Platforms must do better at content moderation — particularly in their users' native languages — and expand their support for independent fact-checking.

> **AI-generated content must be explicitly labeled**

AI-generated content must be explicitly labeled. To allow for auditing, tech companies must provide access to the data to researchers and regulators. Furthermore, algorithms should give prominence to quality information — instead of recommending whatever "slop" happens to grab attention.

Inaction is not an option. Reliable information is not a luxury. There are real benefits for treating information as a global public good. Over the years, journalists have consistently stood up for the cause of information with integrity. Today, we're called upon to take a stand. In order to thrive, human integrity needs information integrity. ■

Journalism in the face of the AI revolution

AI is transforming the ways citizens exercise their fundamental right to seek, impart, and receive information, as well as the journalistic profession overall. AI enhances access to information and the ability to process it, enabling journalists to efficiently analyze vast amounts of data to create content more effectively.

But the use of AI also presents risks. In addition to facilitating the creation of synthetic content and deepfakes that challenge verification processes and public trust, it is changing how information is found. Media consumers increasingly bypass traditional news sources and instead turn to AI chatbots and interfaces. At the same time, the unlicensed use of journalistic content to train AI systems raises critical questions about copyright. AI might also contribute to the homogenization of the global media landscape, potentially reducing diversity in perspectives and weakening media pluralism.

To address this, as a specialized agency supporting media development, UNESCO has produced a policy brief for stakeholders, *AI and the future of journalism*. UNESCO has also supported the World Journalism Education Council in developing *Reporting on Artificial Intelligence: A Handbook for Journalism Educators*. The publication forms part of UNESCO's series which supports journalism education. Recent titles in the series include the updated edition of *Story-Based Inquiry: A Manual for Investigative Journalists*, which incorporates lessons from collaborative cross-border investigations, and *Reporting on the Environment: A Practical Manual for Journalists*, exploring the role of AI in reporting on climate change.

Mie Olsen

Journalist in Copenhagen (Denmark)

Denmark: when readers fund the newsroom

Launched in 2010, the online media outlet *Zetland* bet on a model funded by reader subscriptions, and on publishing less but better content. Today, its success is setting a trend.

© Christian Wendelboe

The office of Zetland, *a Danish digital media outlet specializing in slow news.*

It is 9.00 a.m. on a Tuesday morning in the newsroom of the digital newspaper *Zetland*. The journalists sit around a long table, singing a melancholic classic from the Danish Songbook; the weekly editorial meeting always starts with a song. This is followed by a statistical, data-driven breakdown of last week's story performances, administrative announcements and a mini-workshop on digital story card templates.

We are in a refurbished old warehouse in the hip neighborhood of Islands Brygge in Copenhagen. The vibe on this May morning is relaxed as journalists mosey to their desks. In the corner of the communal room, office furniture stacked up against the wall is physical evidence of the company's growth. They are hiring more people and expanding to another floor.

The premises in Islands Brygge are already home to a motley crew of 60 staff. While journalists and editors work hard on selecting the most important societal stories and narrate them in entertaining, captivating ways, programmers, designers and data analysts focus on developing everything from better audience survey tools to visual design and app functions.

Born from frustration

The digital newspaper *Zetland* was launched ten years ago by media professionals eager for change. "We were four journalists sharing a collective →

frustration over the direction the media industry was heading in," Jakob Moll, one of the four cofounders and former CEO of *Zetland*, explains. "In the early 2010s, digitization was booming and publishers handled it by producing more content with fewer people at an ever-increasing tempo."

Seeking to break away from superficial Internet content and news stories that cut reality into "thin slices served with haste", the cofounders Silke Bock, Hakon Mosbech, Lea Korsgaard and Jakob Moll decided to quit their news jobs and go freelance, while trying to build a new media organization based on a few foundational ideas.

> **"Zetland's business model rests mainly on incoming payments from members**

For Jakob Moll, *Zetland* today combines "our dual roots in the old-school virtues of journalism — such as in-depth storytelling, proofreading, and clear editor roles — with our hyper-digital and data-driven company DNA."

The first idea was to publish very little and only the most important and original stories. In 2026, *Zetland*'s output is limited to two long and timely feature stories per day, plus a news briefing in the morning and a news podcast on the day's most important story in the afternoon.

This core principle leaves journalists time to take each story through a long production phase, with a focus on relevance, originality and research — a draw that has helped the publication attract several high-profile reporters from big national media outlets. One of them is award-winning investigative journalist Line Gertsen, who applied for a job at *Zetland* after 20 years at the Danish Broadcasting Corporation. As a national news anchor and correspondent, she had a reach of over a million Danes on a weekly basis, and very good work conditions.

"My work was solid journalism. But it felt harder and harder to connect with the audiences. Especially with young people. It was difficult to get them interested in the big and important societal stories," she reflects.

She sees her move as part of a wider professional trend towards more depth and presence in a hectic news-scape. "I knew that I wanted to work at *Zetland*, because they have an authenticity in their tone and create relationships with the people who consume their journalism," she explains.

Readers enter the newsroom

Line Gertsen is in the middle of a story about the Danish application system for fertility care, taking a critical look at the selection criteria for accessing treatment. A story that will take 80 minutes to narrate in the podcast, but two months to produce. The initial tip came from a reader, as happens often at *Zetland*.

The publication's business model rests mainly on incoming payments from members and secondly on public media support from the Danish state. Since 2019, the media company has organized annual public crowdfunding campaigns, leveraging an active member base to

Two-thirds of content creators do not check their facts

Digital content creators have acquired an important place in the information ecosystem, whether they engage millions of people or niche communities, shaping conversations around cultural, social, and political news. However, a 2024 UNESCO survey revealed that two-thirds of the 500 influencers surveyed did not systematically check their facts before sharing information. Following this finding, UNESCO launched the first global training course on media and information literacy specifically designed for digital content creators.

The course and related support materials, developed in partnership with the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas, focus on empowering content creators to source and verify information effectively and identify and debunk misinformation. It also encourages transparency in sourcing and emphasizes adherence to global standards on freedom of expression.

This initiative is one of the many practical applications of UNESCO's work in media and information literacy (MIL) and digital competencies. The aim is to enable people to engage critically with information, navigate the online environment safely, and help build trust in both our information ecosystem and digital technologies.

Enabling this work on a broader scale, UNESCO's Media and Information Literacy Alliance brings together more than 430 organizations and 220 individual experts from over 110 countries. Since its inception in 2013, the Alliance has fostered international cooperation in this field, helping communities become more resilient to disinformation, misinformation, and hate speech.

© Christian Wendelboe

Editorial meeting of the Zetland *team.*

recruit new subscribers and ensure its long-term sustainability.

Currently, *Zetland* has more than 40,000 active members, who pay 139 kroner (around US$22) per month. They are invited to participate in the editorial process by proposing story ideas and submitting questions to the newsroom. They can also join separate board meetings. Each story features a contribution section, where the lead journalist answers questions or takes suggestions from readers.

"For more than a century, our industry had a monopoly on interpreting the world. We placed ourselves in an enclosed ivory tower. Journalists tended to care more about what colleagues thought of their work, and less about readers. We wanted to refocus on our relevance for citizens," elaborates Jakob Moll.

This audience-centric approach has become an increasingly popular way to fund public-interest journalism. Studies — such as the latest *Reuters Institute's Journalism, Media, and Technology Trends* report — highlight that focusing on subscriptions and memberships has risen sharply as a priority for publishers in the face of declining advertising markets. In these studies, *Zetland* is often cited as a textbook example of how to make the "membership model" work.

> **"Zetland combines the old-school virtues of journalism, such as in-depth storytelling, with a hyper-digital approach**

Expanding horizons

Building on this success, the company is currently exploring the market for opening a new sister branch in Germany. In 2024, membership-driven *Uusi Juttu* was already launched as a sister publication in Finland, and this summer a similar Norwegian media called *Demo* will see the light of day. Both outlets are owned by *Zetland*, but with shares held by local founders.

This success stands in stark contrast to a Danish and European media industry in decline, where downsizing and cuts are regular occurrences due to declining ad revenues, dwindling readership, and competition from social media and AI.

In 2026, the plan is to expand further. The independent news media was recently bought by Bonnier News, one of the largest media organizations in the Nordic countries, which took over the private investor share. "The investment won't affect our membership model or journalism." Jakob Moll assures, "but it can help *Zetland* expand and reach new markets." ■

Interview by
Katerina Markelova
UNESCO

Charity Ekezie: "News organizations need to find more creative ways to engage with youth"

Trained as a journalist, Nigerian content creator Charity Ekezie has shifted from traditional media to focus entirely on digital platforms. In viral videos posted on social media, the TikTok star with 3.7 million followers uses humour to challenge stereotypical perceptions of Africa.

You initially aimed for a career in broadcast media. What led you to pivot toward social media instead?

I grew up knowing I wanted to work in entertainment; at the same time, journalism was one of my passions as a child. So, moving into content creation wasn't about giving up on journalism, it was simply another side of myself that I wanted to explore.

After finishing my studies in 2012, I volunteered for five years as a newscaster at a campus radio station. Following that experience, I spent some time looking for a job in journalism and eventually found one, but the pay was so low that I turned it down. Ultimately, I decided to stop chasing journalism jobs.

Meanwhile, I was posting skits and livestreams on Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, but hardly anyone was watching because my content was very random: dancing, miming, comedy, and jokes. Everything changed in 2020, during the lockdown, when TikTok exploded. What stood out to me about TikTok was that people didn't have to be perfect, everyone was simply being themselves. I decided to give it a try and start posting things. That authenticity really helped boost my visibility.

Unfortunately, social media monetization opportunities in Africa are limited, so it took me a while to turn this activity into a lucrative career. Luckily, over time, I started receiving collaboration proposals from brands, NGOs, and music artists.

Your videos use humor and visual contradiction — saying one thing while showing the opposite — to challenge stereotypes about Africa. How did you develop this format?

In 2021, someone asked me a very stereotypical question about Africa, and it really irritated me. I made a video in response to this prejudiced view, and that was the beginning of the sarcastic style I use today.

At first, many people took my jokes literally, so I started adding visual clues in the background to highlight the ironic tone of my words. For example, if someone asks whether we have phones in Africa, I'll jokingly say no while a phone is clearly visible somewhere in the shot. Humor is a very powerful tool for challenging preconceived ideas.

A large part of my audience is based in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and across Europe. From the beginning, non-African audiences were my main target, as there is no need to explain to Africans a reality in which they already live.

Have you been shocked by any of the comments?

In 2022, someone asked me whether we still eat human beings in Africa. It was one of the most disturbing comments I had ever received. It went beyond being stereotypical or racist… it was deeply unsettling. I will never forget it. To this day, I still haven't really responded to it. The only thing I did was set up the camera and stare into it silently for a few minutes.

How do you balance being entertaining with staying factually accurate?

My journalism training plays a huge role in that. I always make sure the information I share is factually accurate. Before talking about an African country I don't know much about, I do a lot of reading online, I consult followers, and I speak with friends from those countries.

To prepare one video about different African languages, I contacted people living in those countries to make sure I was pronouncing the phrases correctly. Whenever I create content about specific countries and cultures — such as Sudan or Ethiopia, for example — I do in-depth research and often include factual information on screen so view-

ers can read, learn, and be entertained at the same time.

Can content creators like you influence traditional media's way of doing things?

I think so. Traditional media often presents information in a very heavy and formal way. Yet people, youth in particular, are looking for content that feels lighter and more accessible. That's one of the reasons why social media has taken such a leading role in how audiences consume information today.

> **I always make sure the information I share is factually accurate**

The challenge for traditional media is to figure out how to reach younger audiences without compromising their core journalistic ethics. They need to build a strong presence on social media platforms so people can genuinely connect with them — provided the organizations also change the way they engage with their public. Like influencers, news organizations need to find more creative and engaging ways to present information to younger generations online.

Isn't it destabilizing to be in direct contact with your audience?

On the contrary; I'm truly grateful to be able to reach so many people through my own platforms. I can simply pick up my phone, create content, and people from all over the world can instantly see it. In many ways, social media has really made the world feel like a global village.

I can post a video here in Nigeria and receive comments from someone in Canada or the Philippines. It's a big difference from traditional media, which mostly broadcasts information in a one-way format, while social media creates communities where people can interact.

© World Economic Forum - Female Quotient

Charity Ekezie at a panel discussion held as part of the World Economic Forum in Switzerland in 2025.

What would meaningful, lasting success look like to you? Is it a matter of reducing ignorance, or reshaping how Africa is represented globally?

I want to do both! There's much to be done. Even today, African countries are often not treated as equal players on the world stage, despite the continent being home to many of the world's natural resources.

What Africa needs is not just donations, but investment and genuine partnerships. I want to help move people beyond stereotypes and charity-driven narratives, and encourage them to see Africa as a place of opportunity.

Social media has allowed me to connect directly with grassroots audiences, but it has also opened doors to international platforms such as the COP30 in Brazil in 2025, where I had the chance to speak. I believe those conversations are also helping create meaningful change. ■

Marcelo Silva da Sousa

Journalist in Brasília (Brazil)

Brazil: crossing the local media desert

Nearly 45 per cent of Brazilian municipalities currently have no local news coverage. Faced with these "media deserts", initiatives are emerging to cover local news, but their business models are often still uncertain.

Hit hard by falling readership and the withdrawal of advertisers, traditional media in Brazil, like elsewhere, are in a precarious state. By 2025, over 600 media closures had been registered across the country. But, beyond the statistics, there is also a gradual erosion of collective identity.

Carla Jimenez, former editor-in-chief of the Brazilian edition of *El País*, experienced the void left by the closure of her newsroom in 2021 as a genuine social bereavement. "Many readers felt as though they had lost an ally," she laments.

> **Many local authorities have regained a local voice thanks to news influencers**

Launched in 2013, this Brazilian version of the Spanish daily covered the country's news but also featured issues often overlooked by the mainstream press, such as women's rights and the demands of ethnic minorities. The venture came to an end after just a few years, having failed to find a viable business model.

The situation is particularly worrying for local media. Nearly 45 per cent of Brazilian municipalities currently have no local news coverage. In practical terms, this means they do not have a single journalist to cover council meetings, expose budget irregularities or report on local life.

This wave of media shutdowns affects even established institutions such as the *Diário Popular de Pelotas* in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, a publication that closed in 2024 after 133 years of existence. Meanwhile, the *Diario de Pernambuco*, in the north-east of the country — the oldest newspaper in Latin America — is struggling to remain economically viable.

A deceptive improvement

Paradoxically, however, on a national scale, the media blackout seems to be receding, with the emergence of new digital players. According to the latest census from the *Atlas da Notícia* journalism database, the number of media deserts has fallen by 7.7 per cent over the past two years. In total, 251 municipalities have escaped from the information desert in which they found themselves, and in the Nordeste region alone, 143 towns have regained a local voice.

But for Sérgio Lüdtke, coordinator of the *Atlas*, this new media vitality is not necessarily a guarantee of democratic good health. The progress observed is indeed mainly due to the emergence of independent local news portals, but also to a proliferation of personal blogs and news accounts on social media. Many of these initiatives are the work of local journalists and *news influencers* who, following the closure of traditional media outlets in their regions, have created their own channels to disseminate news and information.

But without a sustainable business model, these initiatives struggle to survive. In just two years, the cumulative number of digital media closures has doubled, rising from 317 in 2023 to 651 in 2025. Sérgio Lüdtke regrets that many of these new media outlets "leave no trace of their closure", disappearing from servers along with the local memory they were trying to preserve.

Another phenomenon is that, faced with the void left by the independent local press, local authority (*prefeituras*) websites are tending to fill the gap. "However, when a local authority becomes the main producer of content, it can be the kiss of death for journalism. Citizens can no longer distinguish between public information and political communication," points out Sérgio Lüdtke.

An essential public good

While many local media outlets are fighting for survival, a new breed of media is emerging in parallel. The editorial team at *Poder360*, in the federal capital Brasília, is in excellent health. Since 2019, its staff has quadrupled. But whilst the 80 or so journalists work-

ing for this digital media work under the watchful eye of a portrait of Ben Bradlee, the legendary editor-in-chief of the American daily *The Washington Post*, its glass-partitioned offices bear no resemblance to the bustling atmosphere of newsrooms of the past.

There are dual screens everywhere, designed to monitor data in real time. What began as a column on UOL — one of Brazil's largest content portals — is now a fully digital media outlet. This magazine has neither a sports nor an entertainment section. Aimed at decision-makers (politicians, entrepreneurs, diplomats and analysts), the teams at *Poder360* dissect political and economic news by providing rigorous analysis of laws, budgets and tax reforms, presented in the form of infographics and easy-to-read summaries.

Guilherme Alpendre, its executive director, attributes this success to the factual and focused style. "We practise journalism in a detached and rational manner. Many media outlets have abandoned this approach in favour of seeking 'engagement' through emotion or opinion," he explains.

> **Many media outlets seek "engagement" through emotion or opinion**

In contrast to *Poder360*'s approach, initiatives are appearing on social media to cover local affairs, such as *Ceilândia Muita Treta* which covers the outskirts of Brasília. Started on Facebook, this project has become a citizen-led alternative to fill the void left by traditional media.

The term *treta* (conflict or scuffle) gives an idea of its DNA — residents can alert the authorities if they notice problems such as a lack of equipment in a health centre or a street lighting issue.

Caught between short-lived news blogs and ultra-specialized, cutting-edge newsrooms, the Brazilian media landscape is searching for its identity. The stakes are high. For Fernando Oliveira Paulino, a lecturer at the Faculty of Communication at the University of Brasília (UnB), journalism — particularly local journalism — must be championed as a public service on a par with healthcare or education. "We cannot speak of citizens as full members of society if the place where they live remains a blind spot for the rest of the country," he insists. "Local news is not an accessory to democracy; it is its very precondition." ■

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Zeng Yan
Journalist in Beijing, China

Chinese journalists go virtual

In China, generative AI is giving journalism a new visual grammar, from digital anchors to cinematic narratives, while sharpening the value of human instinct and insight.

In Wuhan, the capital city of central China's Hubei Province, a 55-year-old woman spent seven months walking 10 kilometers every day. Doctors had told Chen Yurong that her 31-year-old son needed a liver transplant. But she was not qualified as a donor because her liver had accumulated too much fat. So Chen committed herself to long daily walks and a strict diet. Seven months later, medical tests showed her fatty liver had completely disappeared, a process that normally takes years. In a 14-hour operation, she donated part of her liver and saved her son's life.

First reported widely by Chinese media in 2009, the story of the "walking mother" returned this Mother's Day, which falls on the second Sunday in May, as an AI-generated news feature. In the video, a solitary figure moves across changing seasons, her rhythmic footsteps echoing through empty streets. A story once preserved in text archives suddenly gained a striking emotional immediacy for a younger generation. Within two days of its release on Douyin, China's version of TikTok, the film drew millions of views and nearly 300,000 likes.

More than a nostalgic remake, the project offers a compelling glimpse into how generative AI may reshape storytelling in today's newsrooms.

When an old story walks again

"This story moved so many people back then, but more than a decade later, many young people may never have heard of it," says the film's director Li Rang. "A story this good shouldn't disappear with time."

For Li, AI offered a way to retell an old story in the visual language of a younger generation. The film condenses Chen's seven-month journey into just a few minutes, moving fluidly across changing seasons and different times of day along a riverside embankment. With a traditional production crew, the scenes would have required a significant budget and a long shooting schedule. AI-generated imagery also gave the team unusual creative freedom, allowing them to shape the atmosphere, lighting, and rhythm of each sequence with precision.

One of the film's most striking choices was to show the mother only from behind. Rather than creating distance, the faceless figure invited viewers to project their own memories and emotions onto the screen. As one user commented: "She does not show her face because millions of mothers would do the same."

> **"The emergence of digital anchors has pushed some presenters to rethink their roles**

For Li, the project also illustrates AI's emerging role in the newsroom. Technology can reconstruct scenes that are difficult to film and turn archived reporting into vivid visual storytelling. But it cannot replace field reporting, fact-checking, or editorial judgment. "The core of journalism is still truth," Li says. "AI should strengthen the truth, not manufacture it."

"Man in the mirror"

The AI-generated film about Chen Yurong points to a broader shift already unfolding inside Chinese newsrooms. Beyond reviving archival stories, generative AI is increasingly reshaping how news itself is produced and presented.

At Xinhua, China's state news agency, the technology has recently been integrated into parts of its audio and video workflow through a newly developed AI digital anchor platform. In trial clips, virtual presenters deliver short news updates, covering, for example, China's electric vehicle sales or a foreign leader's visit to Beijing, with steady eye contact and the polished cadence of television news designed for mobile screens.

The effect can be disorienting. For anchor Dong Qianqi, seeing his digital double for the first time felt like looking into a mirror that could speak independently. The avatar resembled him almost perfectly, yet it was never tired, never hesitated, and never stumbled over a line. That initial unease gradually gave way to a different realization. What AI replicated most easily, Dong found, were the formal mechanics of broadcasting: pronunciation, pacing, facial expressions, scripted delivery. The more human dimensions of journalism proved harder to reproduce. "What is truly difficult to imitate," he says, "is vivid expression, sensitivity to the reporting scene, genuine connections with interviewees, and an original understanding of current events."

The emergence of digital anchors has consequently pushed some presenters to rethink their roles — spending less time on standardized studio reading and more on live reporting, field interviews, and analysis.

Beyond automation

Rather than replacing journalists, technology is increasingly being used to streamline routine work and free reporters and presenters to focus on tasks that still rely heavily on human judgment, says Bai Lefu, an engineer involved in developing the digital anchors. For newsrooms, the appeal of technology also lies in speed and efficiency. AI anchors can handle repetitive production tasks, deliver updates around the clock, and respond quickly during breaking news situations without the preparation required for traditional broadcasts, such as makeup, studio coordination, or repeated filming.

"Once a script is ready, the system rapidly generates a broadcast video featuring synchronized lip movements and a natural-sounding voice," Bai says while stressing that human editors must always remain "at the helm." But for Bai, the deeper transformation is not simply about efficiency. Multimodal AI, he argues, is beginning to blur the traditional boundaries between text, audio, and video. Reporters who once worked primarily in writing are increasingly expected to think visually from the start, considering not only what a story says, but how it will appear on a phone screen, move across platforms, and hold viewers' attention within seconds.

> **"AI cannot replace field reporting, fact-checking, or editorial judgment**

Even so, the growing presence of AI inside newsroom workflows continues to raise a broader question: what remains uniquely human in journalism? According to Xuan Changchun, deputy dean of the School of Journalism and Communication at Xiamen University, the debate ultimately centres on what journalism uniquely contributes to society. However advanced AI becomes, he argues, it still functions primarily by processing and recombining existing information. Journalism, by contrast, creates what he describes as informational "increments" or new knowledge produced through firsthand observation, field reporting, exclusive investigations, and direct engagement with sources.

That distinction, in Xuan's view, is not merely technical but deeply human. Journalists operate within lived reality, interacting directly with people and events in ways that allow them to capture "details, warmth, and authenticity that transcend text and data." They also exercise forms of judgment that remain difficult to automate — deciding which events deserve public attention, determining how stories should be framed, and weighing the broader social consequences of publication. "Such value calibration," Xuan says, "grounded in real-world experience, ethical awareness, and contextual understanding, can hardly be replaced by algorithms." ■

Courtesy of director Li Rang

◥ *Still frames from the AI-generated short film* Walking Mother.

Subhra Priyadarshini

Editor-in-Chief of Nature India *and a Board director at the World Federation of Science Journalists.*

Science journalism challenged by need for quick content

In India as elsewhere, science journalists are faced with a dual challenge: fighting disinformation and explaining complex phenomena in a world that privileges emotions and simplistic statements.

Ahead of India's summers, environmental journalist Jayashree Nandi often sees viral heat maps declaring the country "the hottest place on Earth" or suggesting apocalyptic warming detached from meteorological nuance. "These heat maps are highly misleading," she says. "There is a propensity to make reporting clickbait, even in science reportage."

Rather than directly debunking each viral claim, she prefers to put the data into a broader context, anchoring the stories in historical weather normals, regional variability, and official data from the India Meteorological Department. But the public must also be willing to put in at least a minimal effort. "Science is unpredictable and open, and you need a certain kind of readership to trust you to report as it is," she says.

Detecting false solutions

In just a few years, the field of science journalism has changed considerably. Science reporting used to function as a transmission system: scientists produced knowledge and journalists translated it for the public. That model has evolved significantly. Science journalists increasingly operate in a context where public trust in institutions has eroded and political polarization shapes scientific interpretation. Audiences now encounter scientific claims alongside conspiracy theories, influencer content, and outrage amplified by algorithms.

This is especially true in climate reporting, where the line between legitimate scientific uncertainty and strategically amplified doubt has become difficult to distinguish. "When disinformation takes the form of a narrative containing half-truths, it is significantly harder to call out," notes Aditi Tandon, a senior editor at *Mongabay-India*.

> **"Misinformation succeeds because it borrows the language and aesthetics of credibility**

Over the past few years, she has led a reporting series examining what climate researchers call "false solutions" — solutions marketed as silver bullets for the climate crisis, even when their practical impact remains uncertain or overstated. "Advocates, industry, officials, and sometimes even scientists were overclaiming the impact," she says. "That required us to be very deliberate about how we framed each piece — to question the proposed solution's scope, scale and practicality instead of glorifying it." Concretely, this involved carefully unpacking the hidden assumptions, breaking down jargon, and publishing explanatory journalism.

An illusion of credibility

Mariyam Alavi, an Indian journalist who has worked extensively on health misinformation and fact-checking, argues that misinformation today often succeeds because it borrows the language and aesthetics of credibility. "Falsehoods no longer arrive as obviously absurd claims," she says, "Instead, they come packaged as emotionally compelling anecdotes, viral wellness trends, selective scientific references, and influencer-driven narratives that appear trustworthy at first glance."

Sahana Ghosh, associate editor at *Nature India*, has also noticed that unreliable climate narratives often borrow the language of scientific caution — serving, for instance, to claim that renewable energy is inherently unreliable, that climate policies are economically disastrous, or that individual ecosystems are doomed beyond repair.

To tackle the systems behind such narratives, she has turned toward long-form explanatory reporting grounded in paleoclimate science, historical evidence and systems thinking. To illustrate

> **Science journalism depends on processes that AI cannot easily replicate**

© V Drone / Shutterstock

Mumbai (India), 2025.

this approach, she cites her investigation into how variations in long-term climate signals can be misread when historical timelines are selectively compared. "That story demonstrated how we can avoid retrospective bias and how evidence can be misused when narratives are imposed first."

No absolute answers

Despite all the efforts made by scientific journalists, misinformation spreads faster because digital media systems reward emotional certainty. Science, by contrast, is provisional and progresses slowly, through a process of constant trial and error. "Science is full of nuance and uncertainty," says Aditi Tandon, "and yet the formats we publish in, and the attention spans we're writing for, push toward absolute conclusions."

Instead of simple narratives and a tone of certainty, responsible science reporting often demands caution — a quality that is much harder to monetize within algorithm-driven media systems. "Often, by the time we come up with the perfectly nuanced story, disinformation has already done the damage," Aditi Tandon says.

On top of these challenges lies public fatigue, or even rejection, of environmental news. Over the past decade, psychologists and media researchers have been warning about "eco-anxiety," especially among younger audiences exposed to relentless streams of catastrophic climate news on pandemics, biodiversity collapse, extreme heat, and food insecurity, among others.

The rising use of generative artificial intelligence has intensified the challenges. Aditi Tandon says she is spotting AI's subtle entry into contributor pitches and story drafts. Yet science journalism has historically depended on processes that AI cannot easily replicate: cultivating expertise over years, understanding uncertainty, and recognizing when something "sounds too good to be true." The good news, Aditi Tandon explains, is that editors are becoming increasingly aware of AI-generated prose that is polished but shallow, featuring hallucinated references and generic explanatory structures that mimic journalism without doing the underlying reporting.

Slow journalism

Perhaps the greatest threat facing responsible science journalism is not misinformation itself but the weakening of the media institutions capable of countering it. In India, as in many parts of the world, ownership concentration, shrinking newsroom budgets and collapsing advertising models have steadily reduced the number of dedicated science desks.

Science reporting requires time. Writing a rigorous article requires reading papers, interviewing multiple experts, understanding uncertainty, traveling to field sites, learning technical language, and verifying claims. "Many independent journalists simply cannot afford the hours that careful science reporting demands," Aditi Tandon explains.

"It is also a fight for space and visibility," says Jayashree Nandi, explaining that climate and science reporters must now compete with a multitude of other topics that dominate public attention. Yet she argues that science journalism cannot survive by appearing only during moments of crisis. "Science reporting has to be persuasive and consistent," she says. "It cannot always be based on what is in the news."

Despite the constraints, there are signs of resilience. Independent newsrooms, nonprofit models, regional-language reporting initiatives and fellowship-supported journalism projects are creating new spaces for deeply reported science stories. Environmental journalists in India are increasingly connecting global crises — climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution — with local realities experienced by communities. "Audiences are capable of handling difficult truths," Aditi Tandon believes, "if these stories are told with clarity and context rather than sensationalism." ■

ZOOM

A day in the life of a teacher in

Photos: Riska Munawarah

Text: Katerina Markelova
UNESCO

Azizah, Blang Awe (Indonesia)

Dawn is just breaking in Seunong, in the Indonesian province of Aceh, west of Sumatra. Azizah, 43, already started the first shift of her day a while ago, in the quiet twilight of her small house. At eight o'clock, she will be standing in front of her 19 pupils at Blang Awe primary school. But before hopping on her motorbike to cover the seven kilometres to the village, she will have been to the public baths, done the housework and got her daughters ready for school.

Lessons finish at midday. Back in Seunong, Azizah moves straight on to her second shift. A single mother of two, she divides her time between her classroom and extra work to support her family. Her salary of around 500,000 Indonesian rupiah a month — barely 30 US dollars — is just enough to cover basic expenses.

So, once the exercise books are closed, she tends the chillis she grows on a little plot of land near her home. Then when night falls, in the silence of the evening, she becomes a teacher again, marking her pupils' work. A task that the frequent power cuts sometimes prolong into the small hours, forcing her to work by the flickering light of a candle. A new day awaits her tomorrow, with its blackboard, gardening, washhouse, kitchen, and marking.

More deeply, the reportage by Indonesian photographer Riska Munawarah, produced specially for The UNESCO Courier, tells the story of the everyday resilience of those who, like Azizah, devote their lives to teaching, listening and helping others to grow. World Teachers' Day, celebrated every year on 5 October, is dedicated to these central figures. ■

Every morning, Azizah, a teacher in Seunong in Indonesia's Aceh province, goes to the public baths.

A single mother of two, Azizah gets her daughters off to school before turning her attention to the housework.

Azizah teaches at a school in Blang Awe, seven kilometres away from her home.

Azizah teaches a class of 19 students.

Azizah guides her students along their learning journey.

Once classes are over, the teachers meet.

After school, Azizah tends to chilis she grows near her home. This additional source of income is essential to provide for her family.

Night has fallen. Soon, it will be time to make dinner for her daughters.

Azizah washes rice to prepare dinner.

Once her daughters are in bed, Azizah corrects her students' assignments, sometimes by candlelight during power outages.

IDEAS

What is the scent of our past?

In contrast to sight, which is traditionally linked to reason, olfactory knowledge has long been dismissed and left largely unprotected. In recent years, however, researchers have been working to document and preserve this fragile heritage — and, in some cases, to resurrect vanished scents.

Cecilia Bembibre Jacobo

Lecturer in sustainable heritage and Director of research at the Institute for Sustainable Heritage, University College London (United Kingdom).

© Flore-Aël Surun / Tendance Floue

Before the city wakes they are already at work, in kitchens cool from the night, the white skirts and headwraps laid out and waiting for the day. Wide enamel bowls hold aromatic herbs that have been macerated and steeped by *Baiana* women, in this season, in this combination, for two centuries and counting. Outside, a fanfare for Lavagem do Bonfim, one of Brazil's largest popular celebrations, is starting in the streets of Salvador, a city in Bahia in the northeastern part of the country. The women crush the leaves with their hands to liberate the smell of resin, mint, something holy. *Água de cheiro*: the water of smells.

On this day, thousands will walk to the Bonfim church in a visual tide of white clothes. Catholic mass and Afro-Brazilian ritual meet on the same hill, where both an image of Christ, brought from Portugal in 1745, and the Oxalá deity of the African spiritual tradition are honoured. *Baianas* — descendants of enslaved women who acquired their freedom by vending food and herbs — will pour the scented water over the steps and the heads of pilgrims at the top of the hill, chanting: *Do colo da Mãe aos braços do Pai* — from the Mother's lap to the Father's arms.

But the women fear their rituals will find no echo in the younger generations. Even the landscape has changed; the herbs in their mixture come from an Atlantic Forest fragment that was twice the size when they were young. To prevent this heritage from disappearing forever, researchers of the *SCENTinel* project have since 2024 documented the scents of crushed herbs and incense before sampling the volatile compounds they release. This pan-European initiative pairs chemistry with practitioners' own descriptions to construct an archive of what the Lavagem smells like today, against which future change can be measured.

The urgency for such initiatives is real: smell heritage is among the easiest to lose. It does not appear in photographs. It evaporates between two generations. Climate and socioeconomic changes are altering the world's smellscapes faster than they can be documented, while practitioners around the world often face challenges with intergenerational transmission.

Heritage according to the eye

Museums and conservation practice today give priority to the eye. Monuments are looked at, artefacts displayed in glass cases. Intangible heritage is documented through what can be filmed or recorded. Smell is rarely acknowledged, and almost never safe-

guarded. This reflects a sensory ordering that accompanied modernity: from the 18th century onwards, sight increasingly became associated with reason and knowledge, while smell was pushed toward the body, the domestic, the fleeting and the irrational. In *Smell and the Past*, the historian William Tullett calls this an ocularcentric account of history, one that still shapes museums, archives and cultural policy today. "When it comes to smell," he notes, "we often do not know what we have until it disappears, or at least until it alters."

Yet many forms of heritage are inseparable from smell. Some are objects designed to perfume the body or the air: incense, pomanders, scented gloves, medicinal herbs bundled into ritual waters. Others depend on trained olfactory knowledge: the nose of a perfumer balancing resins and flowers, or a miller judging flour. Smell also clings to materials and places themselves. The leathery, smoky, vanilla-like air of a historic library, the dusty notes of a metro station, the damp stone of a church after rain all contribute to what makes a place recognizable and memorable. Yet these sensory dimensions often remain peripheral because they are difficult to classify, collect or archive.

A sensory turn

The late 1980s and 1990s saw a "sensory turn" in the humanities and social sciences. Smell, long ranked at the bottom of the Western sensory hierarchy, came under serious cultural and historical study. Heritage science joined in the 2010s, with the publication of a framework to identify and preserve smells with cultural significance. The concept of *olfactory heritage* emerged. Smelling, in this view, is a way of knowing the world. It is also one of the body's deepest ways of remembering it.

The scent of a food can summon a whole history; for diasporic communities, familiar smells sustain connections to places left behind. Anosmia during COVID-19 showed how disorienting losing smell can be. At the same time, pollution, industrialization and climate change are altering the smells of regions and seasons: forests shrink, some plant scents disappear. Australian environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht has described the distress caused by such changes close to home as *solastalgia*: a form of homesickness without leaving. A river, forest or city may still look familiar while no longer smelling as it once did.

Incense and woody resins

New methods are emerging for documenting and safeguarding smell. For smells that still exist, air samples can be collected from objects, buildings, landscapes, or practices and analyzed using specific techniques to identify the volatile compounds responsible for odour. This is often combined with sensory evaluation in which trained participants describe the smell's qualities. Together, these methods help create a detailed archive and recreate aspects of the original olfactory experience.

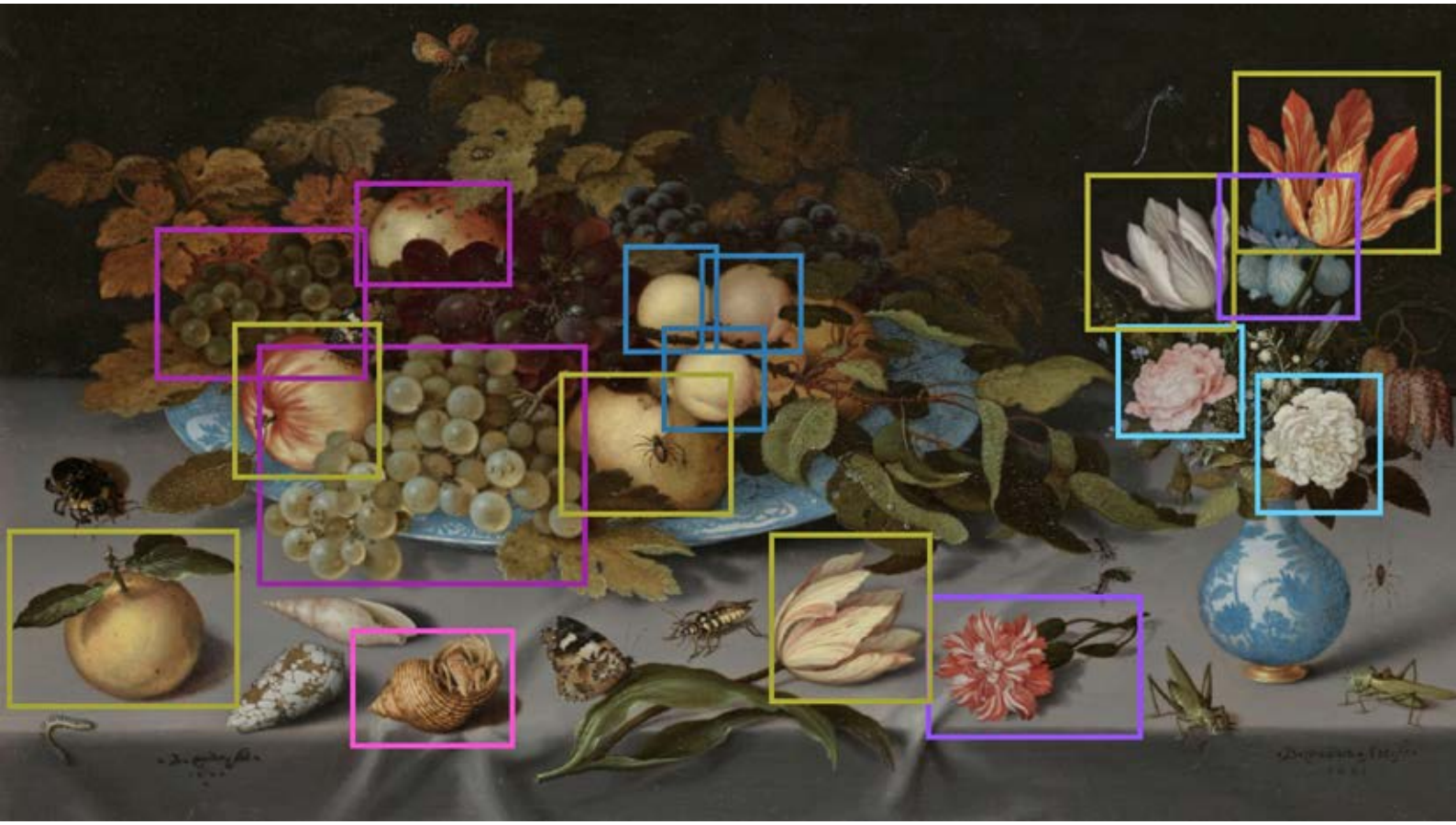
> **"Many forms of heritage are inseparable from smell**

For smells that no longer exist, researchers combine archival sources and historical recipes to recreate them. Such recreations provide a scientifically grounded way to reintroduce lost or endangered sensory dimensions of heritage to contemporary audiences. The European research project *Odeuropa* exemplifies this through its recovery of the 16th-century pomander — a fragrant metal sphere worn as jewellery and carried as medicine. During the plague, smelling a pomander was believed to offer protection: rosemary, clove, and civet pressed to the nose against the street's feared odour of sickness and stagnant air. Today, most pomanders survive in museum

In the 16th century, pomanders were used during plague epidemics. This perfumed piece of jewelry diffused aromatics believed to protect against disease-carrying odours.

© GrandPalaisRmn (musée de la Renaissance, château d'Écouen) / Mathieu Rabeau

Public domain / Rijksmuseum collection / Odeuropa



◥ Still Life with Fruit and Flowers *by Dutch painter Balthasar van der Ast (1620). The European Odeuropa project recreates smells from the past using historical archives and artificial intelligence tools.*

cases as scentless objects. *Odeuropa* has rebuilt their fragrance from period recipes.

Sometimes, the past surprises us. When researchers of the *Odotheka* project (University of Ljubljana in Slovenia) undertook the first systematic olfactory analysis of Egyptian mummified bodies with the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, they expected the stale odour of enclosed remains. Instead, they encountered something closer to a temple interior: woody resins, incense and sweet balsamic notes surviving across millennia.

Safeguarding the invisible

The practitioners' experience is central to *Sensing the Intangible*, a project at University College London's Institute for Sustainable Heritage. The initiative has developed a toolkit allowing practitioners to describe the sensory and embodied cues in their own words. Its first case study is English bellringing, sustained by some 30,000 ringers across 7,000 towers. It gathered experiences from the metallic smell of heated bronze and soot to the resonance of sound, rarely captured in formal inventories.

> **“In the late 1980s, smell came under serious cultural and historical study**

Not every smell should be preserved. The aim is to acknowledge smell's place in living traditions, places and collections before another practitioner can no longer teach what they know.

Come next January, the *Bayana* women will pour the *água de cheiro* over the steps of Bonfim once more, and the scent of basil, myrrh, and incense will rise into the Bahian heat. Yet if the forest herbs disappear, if younger generations no longer learn the ritual, or if sensory knowledge continues to be overlooked, part of the heritage of Bonfim will vanish with them.

The same is true of countless culturally significant smells. Many remain undocumented despite carrying memory, identity and environmental knowledge. As these smellscapes fade, communities lose part of their connection to place. Some forms of heritage survive in stone or paper. Others survive only in the atmosphere, and in people's memories. Both deserve a record before the air changes — unless we take the trouble to resurrect them.. ■

OUR GUEST

Thelma Golden:

© Julie Skarratt

Interview by
Anuliina Savolainen
UNESCO

"The Museum is a space where complex conversations can take place"

The Studio Museum in Harlem reopened its doors in November 2025 following seven years of construction and renovation. In a completely redesigned setting, this New York institution, founded in 1968 to showcase artists of African descent, highlights the richness of Black artistic practice from the 19th century to the present day. For Thelma Golden, its director since 2005, this new building embodies the mission of the Studio Museum: a vibrant, multifaceted space open both to the iconic neighborhood of Black American culture and the world.

The building that houses the Studio Museum's collections has been completely redesigned. How does this transformation reflect the institution's mission?

Our Harlem community was top of mind when we were imagining how our new building might manifest. This objective took shape in various ways, chief among which was the design of the building, which echoes the architectural language of Harlem: the soaring spaces of the places of worship, the presence of the stage in our community, the bustle of the streets, the conviviality of the stoops, and the solid dignity of the masonry-framed windows and doorways.

The new building has been expressly designed for our mission, which is to champion artists of African descent and serve as a gathering place. Visitors can experience a seamless connection between the Museum's exhibitions, its educational initiatives, and its public spaces, which altogether reflect the interconnected nature of art and community that has been at the heart of this institution since its founding.

We also prompted the architects to create a building that would amplify the porous relationship between the Museum and our surrounding community with spaces for the public that can be used for leisure, communal gatherings, screenings, educational programming, and more. At ground level, a double-height window dissolves the barrier between the busy urban street life and the internal world of the institution. Inside, a large stoop at the front leads down to the Museum's lower-level, creating a generous flexible public space — a feature born out of a desire to be as open and accessible from the street as possible. This extends to our roof terrace as well, where you can look out over the rooftops and spires stretching out to the north and south. When visitors come to the building, we want them to feel like Harlem is all around them.

> **"The collection of nearly 9,000 artworks at the Studio Museum in Harlem reveals the extraordinary breadth of innovation in Black artistic practice**

The museum collects, preserves and interprets art created by African Americans, members of the African diaspora, and artists from the African continent. How do these historical collections interact with more contemporary works?

What has been so incredible about our new building is how much space we have to display a wide range of artworks. For our reopening, we felt it was important that we dedicate a large swath of our new home to the display of our permanent collection, which today holds nearly 9,000 artworks that span the nineteenth century to the present, revealing

the extraordinary breadth of innovation of Black artistic practice across time.

To that end, *From Now: A Collection in Context* is a thematic exhibition that unfolds and changes throughout the course of the year. The exhibition brings together works by artists such as Lorraine O'Grady, an icon of 1980s conceptual art; James Van Der Zee, the famed photographer of the 1920s Harlem Renaissance; conceptual artist David Hammons; and the innovative artist-activist Faith Ringgold.

Through the constant rotation of works, we are able to emphasize the many ways artists of African descent have been in conversation with each other and with the public, whether intentionally or not. This can materialize through shared ideas, interests, and beliefs, or through common materials and practices. Ultimately, I hope that visitors who encounter our permanent collection are inspired by a lineage of creativity that is often essential in understanding our shared history — whether of the past, the present, or into the future.

Courtesy Studio Museum in Harlem / Photo: © Albert Vecerka / Esto

The new Studio Museum in Harlem building, opened in 2025, was designed to create a seamless connection between the museum and the neighbourhood through public spaces that can host local events, screenings, or educational programs.

UNESCO celebrates African and Afro-descendant culture

The World Day for African and Afro-descendant Culture, observed annually on 24 January, celebrates the many vibrant cultures of the African continent and the African diasporas around the world. This initiative forms part of UNESCO's mandate to promote cultural diversity and creativity worldwide.

UNESCO adopted this World Day in 2019. Its date coincides with the adoption of the Charter for African Cultural Renaissance in 2006 by the heads of state and government of the African Union. The celebration of this day also aims to promote the ratification and implementation of this Charter by African states, thereby strengthening the role of culture on the continent.

What role does the new Museum building play in today's Harlem?

Harlem is always changing. Despite the flux experienced in the area, it remains the geographic and spiritual soul of Black culture, championed by cultural institutions like the National Black Theater, the Apollo Theatre, The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the Dance Theatre of Harlem, the Harlem Stage, and the National Jazz Museum in Harlem. It is a true privilege that the Museum counts itself as part of this incredible network of organizations that document, celebrate, and tend to this neighborhood's people, traditions, and history.

As for the Museum's own relationship with Harlem, simply put, the gift of our founders is that they put the mission of the institution in our name: the Studio Museum in Harlem. This decisive choice means that we are able to engage with Harlem — both its past and its present — and remain continually involved in what it means to be part of a community. It is in this spirit that we approach much of our programming, especially those programs that extend beyond the Museum's walls: through our *inHarlem* series, which ran from 2016 until 2022, we brought art to the neighborhood's public spaces. We also organize educational programs with many local organizations and schools. Despite the world around us changing, one thing remains the same: our mission is to serve as a home for artists of African descent and for our Harlem community.

You have described the museum as a critical site for dialogue. How can a cultural institution expand its horizons to become a space for encounter?

You'll often hear me say that one of my favorite aspects of a museum, in addition to the artworks themselves, is that they are a space where visitors can encounter art and each other. Across the Museum's floors you will hear guests exchange opinions on the works on view, you will see artists engrossed in conversations around artmaking, and you will come across learners of all ages absorbed in artistic creation in our Education Workshops. This dynamism was codified in 1966 in a document that specified the ideological and programmatic concept of our institution. In it, our founders wrote that the Studio Museum in Harlem 'must be a living museum: a place not only to look, but a place to work and learn and create'.

This desire to create human connection was determined for us by a diverse group of artists, activists, philanthropists, and Harlem residents eager to give visibility to artists of African descent in museums, galleries, and academia. Today, their efforts serve as a manual for our own approach to space-making, with a deep understanding that our Museum is a space where complex conversations around art, truth, and democracy can take place.

> **"Harlem remains the geographic and spiritual soul of Black culture in New York**

Your career has come beautifully full circle — from your 1987 start at the Studio Museum via a decade of landmark exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art, to your return to the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2000 and your appointment as its director in 2005. Was there a specific moment or encounter with art in your youth when you knew you wanted to dedicate your life to the art world?

From the time I was in elementary school, I knew that I wanted to work in museums, thanks, wholly, to my parents. They were both New Yorkers — my father from Harlem, and my mother from Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn — who saw this city as a place open to them fully. They made every effort to make me cognizant that this city was open to me, too. I grew up going to all the city's museums, and to Broadway plays and performances at our iconic performing arts spaces.

By the time I was in tenth grade, I knew I wanted to be a curator, and I eventually came to understand that my role as a curator would be to create space for, and remain committed to, Black artists and Black culture. In my four decades in this field, this has been my signpost. ■

◥ Echoes of Harlem, *a painted cotton quilt by American artist Faith Ringgold, 1980. Collection of The Studio Museum in Harlem.*

© 2026 Faith Ringgold Estate /Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: John Berens

Laetitia Kaci
UNESCO

UNESCO-designated sites: where nature and communities still thrive

Whether they are World Heritage sites, Biosphere Reserves or Global Geoparks, UNESCO-designated sites form a unique network of places where nature and people continue to thrive together. In its new report, People and Nature in UNESCO-designated sites: local and global contributions (2026), UNESCO reveals that life inside these sites is proving far more resilient than elsewhere. These landscapes sustain species, cultures and livelihoods on a global scale. But the window to protect them is narrowing fast.

Why these sites matter

MORE THAN 2,260 UNESCO-DESIGNATED SITES form a global network where biodiversity and culture remains more resilient thanks to healthy ecosystems.

2260+ SITES

13 MILLION KM2

1000+ LANGUAGES

900 MILLION PEOPLE

Sanctuaries for life

UNESCO-designated sites are living landscapes where nature and people remain deeply connected and **play a major climate role:**

73% **decline in global wildlife populations since 1970,** yet those in **UNESCO sites** remain comparatively **stable.**

60% **of globally mapped species are found across these sites,** **40%** of which **are endemic.**

Home to some of the most critically endangered species:

all remaining vaquita
10 INDIVIDUALS (approx.)

all remaining Javan rhinoceros
60 INDIVIDUALS (approx.)

UNESCO-designated sites under threat

But this resilience is under growing pressure. Without stronger action, climate change could accelerate coral bleaching, glacier loss, chronic water stress, species displacement and forest decline.

90% face **high environmental stress.**

40% **rise in climate-related hazards** over the past decade.

98% have experienced at least one **extreme climate event** since 2000.

1 IN 4 SITES could approach **critical tipping points** by 2050.

Priorities for action

3 MILLION KM² **of key biodiversity areas are protected.**

15% **of global CO_2 uptake** comes from **forests in UNESCO-designated sites.**

25% **of sites overlap with Indigenous Peoples** territories.

700 **megatons of CO_2** are absorbed **each year.**

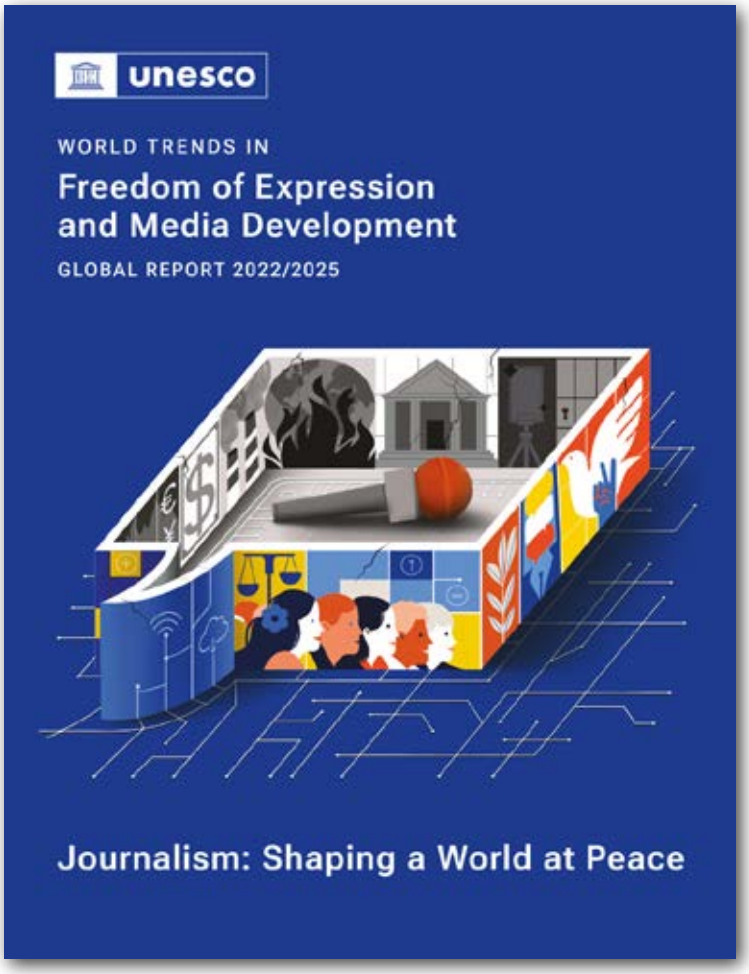
240 **gigatons of carbon stored,** equivalent to nearly **20 years** of current **global fossil fuel emissions**

10% **of the world's GDP** is generated in UNESCO-linked areas.

unesco

World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development

Journalism: Shaping a world at peace



Free, independent, pluralistic, and professional journalism is key to defending human dignity, advancing justice, and sustaining peace. Yet today, freedom of expression is under assault as seldom before.

The UNESCO 2022/2025 World Trends Report highlights a 10 per cent decline in freedom of expression worldwide since 2012 and warns of growing hostility towards journalists, the spread of AI-driven disinformation and misinformation, and setbacks in gender equality. In response to these challenges, UNESCO calls for stronger information integrity, better protection of media freedom, and greater access to reliable information for all, especially young people and vulnerable populations.

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