Pulitzer Prize-winner Eric Freedman was a daily newspaper reporter for 20 years before joining the Michigan State University faculty full-time. He teaches environmental and public affairs reporting and international journalism. His books include Critical Perspectives on Journalistic Beliefs and Actions: Global Experiences (Routledge, 2018); Biodiversity, Conservation and Environmental Management in the Great Lakes Basin (Routledge, 2018); and After the Czars and Commissars: Journalism in Authoritarian Post-Soviet Central Asia (Michigan State University Press, 2011).

Rodney Sieh of Liberia can tell tales of troubles, torment, and trauma. So can Bartholomäus Grill of South Africa, Miles Howe of Canada, Abeer Saady of Egypt, Desislava Leshtarska of Bulgaria, and other journalists who’ve survived arrest, assault, self-exile, lawsuits, and harassment for their coverage of environmental controversies. As their experiences illustrate, however, survival isn’t the same as a return to normal. Rather, many underwent severe psychological trauma and witnessed profound effects on their careers – sometimes driving them away from journalism but other times reinforcing their commitment to the journalistic mission.

Let’s listen first to Sieh, a newspaper journalist who was jailed for three months and fined $1.6 million for defamation after he reported about a former agriculture minister’s involvement with a corrupt financing scheme. That scheme involved the misuse of international funds intended to treat the parasitic infectious Guinea worm disease. The ex-minister eventually withdrew his suit, Sieh was released, and the libel fine was canceled. Years earlier, during the country’s brutal civil war, Sieh had fled Liberia to report elsewhere in Africa and the United States, later returning home where he’s now the publisher and editor-in-chief of Liberia’s biggest-selling independent newspaper and website, FrontPage Africa.

“It was funding for Guinea worms that took over a whole village,” Sieh says. “They were killing the farmers’ produce. The government, the administration at the time, was concerned because the international community was concerned they were becoming a problem.” International funders had made contributions to combat the disease, “and when the money was misused, that’s where we came in.” That “coming in” – meaning incisive reporting – landed him in Liberia’s most notorious prison:
The prison conditions alone, the way people are treated there, are horrible. That alone sicks you, it makes you lose some kind of morale. It’s meant to intimidate; it’s meant to demoralize you. If you don’t have the right people around you, the right setting to survive post-prison, it puts you in a position where you have to think twice about where you live, about your work.

What happened to Sieh and other journalists from around the globe illustrates why environmental journalism is characterized as one of the most dangerous news beats. Some journalist-victims primarily report on environmental news; others cover environmental controversies as part of a broader portfolio, such as investigative, business, or general assignment reporting. Some are staff members; others are freelancers. One estimate puts the death toll at 40 such journalists killed between 2005 and 2016 because of their work – a higher number than the total of journalists killed covering the US war in Afghanistan (Warren, 2016).

Not surprisingly, natural perils also confront environmental journalists in the field, from devastating exotic diseases to the wrath of natural disasters, from wild animal attacks to crippling or fatal accidents. They come with the territory, literally. For example, Charlie Hamilton James, a documentarian and photographer for National Geographic, has described how a botfly burrowed into his scalp and how he contracted a flesh-eating disease called leishmaniasis while on assignment in the Peruvian Amazon. As he wrote, “The list of biting and stinging bugs in one area I was working looked like this: mosquitos, biting flies, ticks, chiggers, sand flies, ants, bees, wasps. I’ve played host to most of these creatures” (James, 2014).

Journalists covering environmental issues are at greater risk of becoming targets than their peers on many other beats due to what Reporters Without Borders (Reporters sans Frontières) has highlighted as a “hostile climate for environmental journalists” (2015). True, they face many of the same risks as colleagues covering other issues, especially in countries with little or no press freedom. However, there are additional dangers because environmental controversies often involve influential business and economic interests, political power battles, criminal activities, anti-government insurgents, and corruption. Further complications include the ambiguous distinction between “environmental journalist” and “environmental activist” in many countries, and the fact that some environmental stories also involve contentious politically, culturally, and economically sensitive issues concerning Indigenous rights to land and natural resources.

Tragically, some journalists targeted for their coverage of environmental issues – among them Muhammad Yusuf of Indonesia, Gerardo Ortega of the Philippines, and Tang Try of Cambodia – can no longer tell tales of their own troubles, torment, and trauma. They are among the dead.

Yusuf had written more than 20 articles for news websites about an influential palm oil company’s controversial land development for a huge oil palm plantation. The company’s complaint led to criminal charges of defamation and hate speech, and in 2018 he died of a heart attack while in custody after authorities jailed him on the libel allegations (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2018). In the Philippines, a gunman fatally shot Ortega, a radio journalist who had critically reported on local mining operations and allegations that a provincial governor had stolen gas field revenues. The former governor and his brother, a former local mayor, were arrested on charges of masterminding the murder (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2015a). And an attacker shot Try in the forehead on a dirt road in eastern Cambodia where he and other journalists were investigating illegal logging (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2014).
While most attacks, physical and otherwise, against environmental journalists occur in lesser-developed countries like Liberia, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Cambodia, their counterparts in developed countries are targeted too. A study of Finnish journalists identified environmental issues, along with coverage of immigration, racism, religion, and gender equality, as “trigger subjects that generate threats and harassment” (Hiltunen, 2017).

I’ve interviewed Global North journalists who had been arrested while reporting on protests opposing a controversial oil pipeline in the United States and against hydraulic fracturing in Canada, as well as journalists covering toxic dumping, the oil and gas industry, environmental health problems, environment-related corruption, illegal mining, and other environmental topics in the Global South. One of them arrested while covering the anti-pipeline protests at Standing Rock Indian Reservation in North Dakota, freelancer Jihan Hafiz, recalls the “shock and the violence” she encountered: being chased by police, watching police attacking demonstrators, the humiliation of a strip search, and sleeping on the jail floor. She compared it to some of things she saw while reporting in the Middle East, and she says, “I still dream about those moments.”

Let’s hear from more of these environmental journalists.

Bartholomäus Grill, a South Africa-based correspondent for the German magazine Der Spiegel, was detained by village residents and then by police and threatened by a rhino poaching kingpin in Mozambique.

Grill and a Swedish freelance photographer were there to report about poaching. Before going to the kingpin’s village, they’d been told, “‘It’s not a problem, there’s no danger at all, just go on and do your job.’ So, we did,” Grill says. “It’s easy to find the houses of the kingpins. They’re posh. They have balconies. Some have swimming pools.” They located the kingpin’s house, where his wife was working in the garden. The gate was open, and Grill’s local translator went in and chatted with the wife. She immediately called her husband. Grill describes what happened next: “He was furious, naturally,” and summoned his supporters. “Many of them were working for him. He provides jobs. They surrounded us and accused us of not being journalists or being from the secret service or South African spies.”

“We were in a bad situation surrounded by 100 very angry young boys, young men, between 12 years and 25 years old. They threatened us and made the symbols to kill us, to cut off our heads,” he continues. “First the people would say, ‘What’s this all about the rhinos? All you white people care about the rhinos. We see all these tourists cross our village and all they care about is the animals. They don’t care about us.’” The villagers then took Grill and the photographer to the police station, where they faced charges of trespassing and invasion of privacy. “From the beginning, it was very clear the police officer was part of the network – he knows them all. On the other hand, he’s a representative of the Mozambique state,” Grill says. Two kingpins arrived and “more or less conducted the investigation. I saw the police chief shivering because it was very clear he was not in charge of the interrogation. There was no chance of running away.”

The two journalists were freed only after diplomatic intervention.

Another tale: Award-winning Egyptian journalist Abeer Saady was physically assaulted by thugs working for a company that was dumping toxic waste into the Nile River. She later moved out of Egypt and now trains international journalists about safety.

“They attacked me. . . . They broke my glasses, they nearly broke my leg. I had scratches. They didn’t break my leg, but it hurt for many days,” Saady says. “They were powerful to the extent that when I went to report the incident to the police, they made it like it was a fight. But the police said it would be my case against their case. They refused to send me to the hospital. This company continued its work.”
In the crosshairs

She goes on, “I was so frustrated. I wanted to keep my job. So you lick your wounds.”

Still another tale, this one from Canadian Miles Howe, who was working for a small independent online news organization, not being paid much but also “not beholden to corrupted editors. Our mandate was to provide unreported or underreported stories.”

That mandate took him to New Brunswick, where the First Nations community of Elsipogtog opposed exploration for natural gas. “Many times, I was the only accredited journalist witnessing rather violent arrests, third-trimester pregnant women being locked up, guys tackled to the ground,” Howe says. “People started feeding me with a lot of documents – clues or avenues to chase, so we started breaking a lot of stories.” Not everyone was happy. “I don’t know if it was jealousy, but I was doing a good job of covering this while the mainstream media was showing up late or getting it wrong. I think there was a lot of pressure to discredit what I was saying.”

What ensued were multiple arrests – with charges later dropped – seizure of his equipment, searches of his home several hours away, even an offer from police to pay him for information about the protestors’ upcoming “events.”

And one more tale for now, this one from Bulgarian newspaper and online journalist Desislava Leshtarska. She was threatened and targeted in a smear campaign for her coverage of a mountain ski resort monopoly situated in a UNESCO-protected area where large-scale environmental violations have occurred.

As Leshtarska explains, environmentalists had been fighting against the ski area concessionaire for many years because of environmental violations “and the state’s worrying disengagement” from taking action about the violations. “There was a severe smear campaign against the environmental activists, mostly about them stealing money from Swiss and EU [European Union] funds. At some point, an online tabloid wrote that I and another TV colleague also took benefit from these funds – that the environmental NGOs are paying us with taxpayers’ money. It was absurd.” And when a caller told her that “‘they’ could fabricate news about me in the tabloids, I was very upset and disgusted.” She continues, “It didn’t make me less aggressive but more aware of what these people are capable of and what their methods are. Now I knew what to expect.”

Psychological impacts

Experts have identified a variety of responses to trauma and stress among journalists, and arrests, assaults, harassment, and other attacks can trigger short-term and long-term impacts on targeted environmental journalists. At one end of the range are psychiatric disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depressive disorders, and substance use disorders; those who display resilience fall at the opposite end of the spectrum (Iacoviello & Charney, 2014). journalists’ capacity to concentrate may be impaired, and they may live in a state of fear of future incidents. For example, clinical psychologists Hawthorne Smith and Katherine Porterfield say PTSD and depression are the best-known of those impacts among post-incarcerated journalists, such as the ones they work with through the Bellevue Hospital/New York University Program for Survivors of Torture. Their New York City-based program has assisted journalists from a geographically wide range of regions, including West and Central Africa and the Middle East (Freedman, 2017).

Smith says, “We cannot talk about post-traumatic stress when somebody is still living in very precarious situations,” facing such problems as uncertain immigration or asylum status if they’ve fled their home countries, separation from family, financial pressures, and knowledge that the repressive regimes that persecuted them remain in power. “These are not people who can encapsulate their trauma as something in the past.”
Another ramification is “survivor guilt” for escaping to safety while their relatives are left behind. Smith says, “When things go poorly, not only have they been tortured, not only have they suffered, it is often visited on the family as well.” Authorities may interrogate relatives in their home country, for example. Family obligations may also weigh heavily on self-exiled journalists. Porterfield describes a formerly jailed journalist who is “scrambling to make money, to bring his family [to the United States]. He’s putting his toe in the water,” and confronting the logistics of returning to work as a journalist.

After long-time Africa-based foreign correspondent Grill was threatened, detained, and interrogated while reporting on rhino poaching in Mozambique, he dreamt about the poaching kingpin who’d threatened him. Following one nightmare, he contacted the widow of a man murdered by the same kingpin. “In front of her he shot her husband in the head.” Grill recalls, “She said, ‘I will never forget those eyes.’ And those eyes were chasing me.” He then underwent therapy for the first time in his career. “I had a few sessions with a trauma counselor to get rid of this image of those big eyes. The psychiatrist said you have to diminish this giant into a dwarf.”

Yet the reluctance or inability of most of these environmental journalists to seek therapy or counseling reflects why journalism has been characterized as “a profession in denial” (Ananthan, 2017, p. 17), even as some of them acknowledge the psychological price they’ve paid – and some still pay – for their work. For example, Saady says she was not “lucky enough” to have counseling after multiple traumatic experiences of being physically assaulted in Egypt, later covering wars and other conflicts, and witnessing journalist friends killed by ISIS. She did “some self-mitigation,” including returning to school, becoming a trainer on journalist safety, and relying on her religious faith. “The part of Islam that helped me is talking to God,” she says.

Jenni Monet is a US freelancer and filmmaker who was arrested – “shuttled to jail in a school bus along Highway 1806,” as she later wrote (Monet, 2017) – while covering protests on Standing Rock Indian Reservation against the Dakota Access Pipeline. She didn’t seek therapy after her arrest but did talk over her experiences in detail with friends.

Keya Acharya is an Indian freelancer who received a $16.3 million legal notice alleging that she’d defamed the founder of an export company in her coverage of the Indian rose industry’s operations in Africa. Fortunately for her, the plaintiff never formally took the case to court, but the threat was highly disturbing nonetheless. She points out the absence of counseling services for her in India:

Any kind of help for journalists in such situations, especially for freelance journalists, even if they’re senior, is non-existent in India. It would certainly have helped me if I did have some counseling, but since there’s no such system in this country, it didn’t even occur to me to seek help. I wouldn’t have known where to look.

As for the lack of therapy services, Sieh similarly notes that Liberia had only one psychiatrist in the country at the time of his release from prison, and he didn’t seek therapy.

For Howe, serious psychological problems followed his multiple arrests and the seizure of his professional equipment, coupled with his partner’s death during the time he was covering the anti-fracking protests in Canada. “I do continue to suffer from psychological impediments related to these arrests and . . . speaking on this topic usually does trigger difficult emotions for me to deal with,” he says. “What did it do to me? It made me upset, angry. It made me elitist in some sense.” He didn’t receive therapy until he left journalism more than two years later but says, “In hindsight, I should have. I didn’t have the wherewithal.”
Several environmental journalists targeted for their work say the support – psychological, legal, publicity, financial – they received from their news organizations, from colleagues, and from press rights defender groups was important during and after their ordeals.

However, freelancers among them emphasize that their lack of an “employer” meant they had no institutional employer support. In fact, Acharya encountered hostility and professional repercussions from Inter Press Service, the news agency she freelanced for in coverage of the Indian rose industry. In disclaiming her story, IPS said on its website, “We are suspending the contents of this article so as to ensure their veracity and that of the sources on which it draws and, therefore, request our subscribers not to republish or use it in any way.”

Acharya voices a sense of betrayal by her own editor who removed the controversial story and terminated her affiliation with IPS within 24 hours. That editor refused to take her calls and “told me . . . that his job was on the line and basically assumed I had written a load of rubbish.” Acharya’s reaction? “It felt really bad to have an editor not just cut me off and leave me to the wolves, but to slam my work.”

Although feeling abandoned by the news agency, she did receive support from the London-based Media Legal Defence Initiative, which covered her legal expenses, as well as support from editors at several newspapers and from many senior journalists who covered her case and kept the Committee to Protect Journalists informed. Reporting on her situation, the press rights advocacy organization called Acharya’s legal troubles “a window onto a pattern of how big businesses are using India’s outdated defamation laws to silence criticism of their operations.” It also noted that the authors of a book about suspected irregularities in natural gas pricing in India had, similarly, received defamation notices from two offended corporations (Galhotra, 2014).

Saady also complains how employers mistreat journalists who receive threats and make sacrifices, as happened to her in Egypt: “You can do the story and survive all the harms and the story is not published because that company [which was investigated] is publishing advertising in your own media house.”

Bruce Shapiro, the executive director of the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, stresses that the culture of a news organization is important. Returning to a “supportive newsroom” after a traumatic incident “is protective.” That is true especially for environmental and social justice reporters “who are drenched in highly toxic material all of the time.” If they come back to a “hostile or chaotic” newsroom, “in a sense the social contract out there is broken. When a newsroom mirrors that, it can be damaging.”

**Resilience**

Psychologists define resilience “as adaptive characteristics of an individual to cope with and recover from (and sometimes even thrive after) adversity” (Iacoviello & Charney, 2014, p. 2) or as “the capacity for successful adaptation, positive functioning, or competence . . . despite high-risk status, chronic stress, or following prolonged or severe trauma” (Egeland, Carlson, & Sroufe, 1993, p. 517).

Some trauma victims also undergo post-traumatic growth, or PTG. Researchers have found that as many as 70% of victims report at least one positive outcome of such negative events in their lives, and they may include changed life goals, improved relationships, and changed spiritual and religious beliefs (Anastova, 2014).
Formerly jailed journalists, whom psychologists Porterfield’s and Hawthorne’s center worked with in New York City, displayed high resiliency despite “enormous barriers” in getting back on their feet and returning to their work. “Everyone clearly met the criteria for PTSD, and many were suffering from other physical ailments, as well as depression and mood disorders,” Porterfield says. “In spite of this, you still see people saying, ‘I’ve got to get back out there,’” he says.

The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma’s Shapiro says:

Overall, journalists are a pretty resilient tribe. Their rates of PTSD and depression are comparable, 13–15 percent, to first responders. This again associated with a sense of mission, a sense of training. With environmental and social justice reporters, you’re often dealing with a higher-than-average sense of mission and purpose and a higher level of skill. I think that’s protective.

Several of the victimized environmental journalists I interviewed profess such a rebounding – of recommitment to their mission as journalists in general and as environmental journalists in particular. For Sieh, prison in Liberia failed to accomplish what authorities hoped for: “to keep me silent.” To the contrary, he continues, “it really elevated our work to an international level that we would never have had if I weren’t arrested. It made us stronger, bigger, better. . . . We keep the pressure on the government.”

Similarly, Leshtarska says threats of a smear campaign against her for spotlighting the Bulgarian ski resort’s environmental violations “didn’t make me ‘less aggressive’ but more aware of what these people are capable of and what their methods are. Now I knew what to expect. They strengthened my belief in the need of high-quality independent journalism.”

Bram Ebus expresses a similar perspective. He is a Colombia-based Dutch journalist who was detained with his companions and interrogated by the National Guard and military intelligence while reporting on illegal mining in Indigenous communities in Venezuela. The country’s authoritarian president, Nicolás Maduro, had “opened a huge territory to mining,” an area with increasing conflicts involving illegal miners, guerrilla groups from Colombia, and Indigenous groups. So Ebus and three companions – the human rights coordinator of a church, an Indigenous guide, and a driver – set out for the region. The National Guard detained them at a mining company where they were attempting to interview the director. What followed were hours of questioning, a night-time Jeep ride through the jungle, a short-lived period of freedom, and then another round of detention and grilling, this time by state military intelligence.

After Ebus’s release, he resumed the investigative reporting project. “I never felt so motivated to continue with this research. . . . For myself, it got more motivated after the detention,” he recalls. He also says he suffered “very little” emotional impact from his detention and interrogation while reporting in Venezuela but acknowledges that his conscience bothers him for exposing his detained companions to danger, although they all were fully aware of the potential risks.

Career and professional impacts

An incident or attack may trigger an immediate negative effect on a journalist’s work, as happened to Hafiz when police seized her camera during her arrest at Standing Rock. “They confiscated my livelihood and my ability to work. There was a lot going on around me. I could only report on the telephone or write an article, but I couldn’t photograph it, and that’s what I do.” Although she got her camera back, she was threatened with being jailed until trial if she went too near the pipeline project’s construction equipment. “It just made me more cautious about my surroundings and prevented me from going closer to the action. . . . It altered my ability
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to work. I was concerned about being arrested again,” she says. “What if they confiscated my equipment again? Or erased my video?”

Interestingly, one study of US journalists found:

[H]aving been in danger had no association with either job satisfaction or perceived workplace morale. . . . As might be expected, journalists who had been in danger said that they dealt more frequently with traumatized sources or subjects than did journalists who had not been in danger. They also reported feeling better-prepared to deal with those sources or subjects. However, being in danger did not have a significant relationship with career commitment.

(Bean & Spratt, 2009, pp. 431–432)

In the long-term, their experiences dramatically affected some of the journalists’ career paths.

To illustrate, Augustina Armstrong-Ogbonna was an award-winning Nigerian journalist whom the United Nations Correspondents Association recognized for courageous reporting and “brav[ing] dangers to report on Nigeria’s coastal communities ravaged by conflict and degrading environment that affect development and human lives” (BellaNaija.com, 2015). But when she investigated illegal dredging, she received threats from a former government minister, was tracked by state security forces, and found herself accused by one of her news directors of “being paid by foreign people to make my country not produce oil.” She also found assignments had dried up; she had expected a lot of colleagues to give her work, but most didn’t.

Armstrong-Ogbonna gave up both journalism and her country. Now living in the United States, she says, “I’ve done my piece for the world. I’ve done my piece for the environment. . . . Nobody came to my rescue.”

For those who stay in journalism, the experiences can affect their ability to do their jobs. For example, Acharya, whose investigation of India’s rose industry sparked the threat of legal action, says:

I got a sort of mental block, after that (legal) notice, for a long period. I couldn’t write any more. In fact, I’ve not been able to recover my spate and my speed of work since then. I felt tired of chasing field stories – in any case I had no regular publication after that, and I didn’t have the energy to build up a relationship all over again somewhere else. But what I did do was turn to training/teaching/organizing and guiding journalists (media fellowships, etc.).

Journalists who’ve undergone imprisonment, retaliatory litigation, or attacks may discover that news sources are understandably reluctant to cooperate with them, especially in authoritarian countries where journalists are closely monitored.

The ethics front

“I believe in the environment but I am not an activist. . . . I am a journalist who believes in the environment,” Saady says. “Being an activist is a tempting thing, I know. I realized that crossing that line for me was going to make me be classified, and I don’t want to be classified.” Her position reflects the predominantly Western expectation that journalists should maintain objectivity in their work – even when covering a topic they feel passionate about – and avoid conflicts of interest.

Yet scholars and journalism professionals have long acknowledged that ethics standards, expectations, and on-the-ground realities differ from country to country and from time to
time (Jones, 1980). Many studies have explored such distinctions and the reasons for them (Limor & Himelboim, 2006; Hanitzsch et al., 2011). Those differences include demarcations among “objective” journalism, advocacy journalism, “citizen journalism,” and advocacy. They also reflect differences among media platforms (newspaper, magazine, broadcast, online, social media) and media ownership (for-profit, non-profit, government, oppositional).

Freelance journalist Saul Elbein, who covers international environmental conflicts, observes that the boom in illegal logging and deforestation “has turned the environmental beat into a new sort of conflict journalism.” In such coverage, the murdered victims have “overwhelmingly been local reporters . . . covering illegal mining or logging. They are largely independent, poorly educated, untrained, and despised by their nations’ Establishment Media. Reporting on a violent, corrupt frontier, they are never sure when they’ll cross a line and end up dead. Their lives in their hands, they head into the woods” (Elbein, 2016).

Elbein traveled through rural Cambodia, where local journalists covering illegal logging activities have been killed by gun and axe, to interview journalists and their surviving colleagues and relatives. He notes that professional ethical values are different there than in the West and says it isn’t uncommon for journalists there to accept money from sources and from loggers. And he recalls a local journalist’s comment that just because the way of doing journalism in Cambodia isn’t up to US ethical standards “doesn’t mean they’re not real journalists.”

“They seem pretty mission-driven,” Elbein says. That means “we will stand up to local power brokers. We will stand up to the army. We will stand up for forest communities, but we’ll also be able to achieve some power.” Life in rural Cambodia, as in other rural areas, is difficult, with few avenues to address local people’s problems. “Corruption and impunity are so institutionalized . . . that journalism creates one possible channel for doing something, and if you can make a few bucks from it, great.”

Importantly, in parts of the world where little or no independent professional journalism takes place, bloggers may fill some of the informational gap, and it may be difficult to differentiate “blogger” from “journalist.” In Vietnam, for example, which lacks a free press, the government charged blogger Pham Minh Hoang with trying to overthrow the regime, stripped him of his citizenship, and deported him. Among the articles that offended authorities were ones about environmental degradation (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2017).

In addition, professional journalists’ unwillingness or inability to cover environmental controversies in places of peril or to access the credible news sources needed in remote and Indigenous areas will lead to more activists and bloggers “reporting” the news – often with no background in established professional and ethical standards. As one scholar observed, “Environmental reporters are more often silenced quietly through economic pressure. . . . The pressure may be so great on traditional journalists . . . that bloggers may emerge as the chroniclers doing the best reporting” (Smyth, 2010).

That said, bloggers also can serve as important news providers in developed countries with free press systems such as the United States where independent professional journalists do cover environmental controversies. Consider Sharon Wilson of Texas, who was sued by an energy company for her coverage critical of hydraulic fracking. She sees herself as providing such a service to the public.

“I consider myself a journalist. I have a blog . . . I do original investigations,” Wilson says, adding that she fits her state law’s definition of a journalist as “anyone who informs the public by doing journalism and makes part of their income by doing that.” She continues, “I’m a resource
and the [news] media actually come to me for information. I inform the public and do these investigations, but I know I’m just a little blog here. I turn my investigation over to them and they write a big story, and sometimes they credit me.”

Indigenous-environmental issues

When it comes to environmental controversies, there may be a nexus between journalists and Indigenous rights. One study described how Indigenous journalists in South America play an increasingly vital role in uncovering the vast legal and illegal exploitation of natural resources, forests, and land there (Krøvel, 2017). That research illuminates the intersection of anti-journalist violence, environmental journalism, “Indigenous journalism,” natural resource issues, and the sometimes-blurred dividing line between “environmental journalist” and “environmental activist.” The study used the murder of an “Indigenous environmentalist” in Honduras to shed light on “the problems of demarcating the border between journalists and non-journalists” (p. 195); the victim was simultaneously a leader in a grassroots anti-dam campaign, cofounder of an Indigenous rights organization, and the founder and operator of three radio stations. Based on interviews with Indigenous and community journalists in Colombia, Nicaragua, and Ecuador, the author noted that “most ‘Indigenous journalists’ prefer to be referred to as ‘communicators’ instead of ‘journalists,’” (p. 192) and on much of the continent, “recognition as journalists is crucial for the right to protection, for gaining access to the airwaves, as well as numerous other issues related to freedom of expression” (p. 196).

Monet, one of the many journalists arrested at Standing Rock, has covered other stories rooted in that nexus. “Most times I’m with Indigenous people [on such stories] and I see things through their eyes,” she says. She usually works in “areas of conflict and places related to local populations in conflict with some form of corruption or power, overstepping for their own wealth and benefit, not for the benefit of the general population.”

As for the situation in Canada, Howe says, “When I got into journalism, it wasn’t my intention to pick up the Eastern Canadian Indigenous beat. I was interested in environmental problems.” As he became acquainted with members of the local Indigenous community, “it became clear there was an environmental component as well” to those stories.

That nexus is also evident in the murder of Datu Roy Bagtikan Gallego, a radio commentator and tribal president in the Philippines. As the International Federation of Journalists (2011) reported, he had frequently criticized mining operations and made broadcasts in defense of tribal rights. It is also evident in the arrest of tribal journalist Somaru Nag, who reported on rural issues, such as development and access to electricity and water in India (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2015b).

The nexus links with ethical issues too, as magazine editor Tristan Ahtone, a Nieman Fellow and board member of the Native American Journalists Association (NAJA), points out: “We saw that clearly in Standing Rock. With NAJA, we had to put out ethical guidelines for journalists. We saw it mostly with young Native reporters who were happy to blow the [ethical] line and didn’t see any problem with that.” The reasons were partly training and partly cultural. “A lot of it is having a different world view. In NAJA, we follow SPJ (Society of Professional Journalists) protocols and ethics but feel there is an increased need to indigenize that” to accommodate more than one journalistic tradition.

The vulnerability of environmental journalists to violence, retaliation, obstruction, and abuse of power is deeply disturbing, as is the fact that those responsible often operate with impunity. Meanwhile, there seems to be less awareness within the profession of that vulnerability in
environmental coverage than in what are widely perceived as higher-risk beats, such as organized crime and drugs, war, terrorism, and corruption.

**Unanswered questions**

Environmental journalists – actually all journalists – are individuals who react in individual ways to job-related pressures, crises, and trauma. Although each has unique experiences that can’t be generalized to all journalists who are attacked for their environmental coverage, there are commonalities relevant not only to individual journalists at risk but also to news organizations, mental health professionals, press and human rights defender non-governmental organizations, journalism educators and trainers, and governments.

Many factors shape their positive and negative experiences, including the type of media organizations they report for, the regime in power, national laws and regulations regarding the press and the environment, gender, length of time in the profession, and the nature and nuances of the controversies they cover. Those who are arrested are held for differing amounts of time under different conditions of imprisonment. Those who are assaulted, sued, threatened, abandoned by their employers, or harassed suffer different types and levels of physical, psychological, financial, and professional repercussions.

Regardless of such individual variations, we need to know more about the impacts on the work of these journalists, their peers, their newsroom supervisors and media outlet owners, their families, their audiences, and their news sources. We need to hear their personal stories in their own words because victimized journalists can provide unique individual perspectives that shed light on the challenges and satisfactions of their jobs. That’s particularly true for environmental journalists whose vulnerability is exacerbated by the economic, political, and cultural sensitivity of the controversies they cover and by the criminal, Indigenous rights, and corruption components of many of those stories.

Among the questions needing further examination: How do such experiences affect their approach to reporting, both immediately and in the longer term? How do they deal with sources afterwards, especially sources with good reason to fear for their own well-being? Do these journalists develop back-channel methods of operating to make their roles less visible and, thus, to possibly reduce their vulnerability? How do their editors and news directors subsequently treat them in terms of assignments, play for their stories, and salaries?

On a practical level, we need to know whether press rights advocacy groups need new strategies to more successfully protect and advocate for environmental journalists and to prevent future abuses. If so, what might those strategies look like? In addition, we should consider whether environmental journalists need the type of safety training that many war, foreign, and conflict journalists now receive. Professional organizations – both international ones such as the Society of Environmental Journalists and national ones such as the Brazilian Network of Environmental Journalism – could provide leadership in such endeavors.

We – journalists, governments, the public at large – must recognize that the environmental journalism beat will always carry risks because of the crucial importance of its work. Standing Rock arrestee Hafiz explains this reality in talking about coverage of extractive industries, such as mining, logging, and drilling: “There’s danger in covering environmental issues. It’s dangerous regardless because you’re dealing with corporations and snooping in areas they don’t want you around.” Yet without “snooping around,” environmental journalists cannot fulfill their mission.
In the crosshairs

Interviews (phone, Skype, and email)

- Keya Acharya (March 11, 2018)
- Tristan Ahtone (March 15, 2018)
- Augustina Armstrong-Ogbonna (February 13, 2018)
- Bram Ebus (March 20, 2018)
- Saul Elbein (February 23, 2018)
- Bartholomäus Grill (March 1, 2018)
- Jihan Hafiz (February 13, 2018)
- Miles Howe (February 13, 2018)
- Desislava Leshtarska (March 16, 2018)
- Jenni Monet (February 1, 2018)
- Katherine Porterfield (March 30, 2017)
- Abeer Saady (February 2, 2018)
- Bruce Shapiro (February 27, 2018)
- Rodney Sieh (February 1, 2018)
- Hawthorne Smith (April 10, 2017)
- Sharon Wilson (February 27, 2018)

References


