



Bill Gentile, second from left, tours floodwater canals under the border city of Nogales, Mexico, with freelancers Ioan Grillo, left of Gentile, Milton Martinez, in silhouette to the right, and heavily armed police escorts. The canals are frequently used by human and drug traffickers moving their illicit goods from Mexico into the United States.

Photo by Matt Cipollone

Freelancers: Valuable and vulnerable

Downsizing and increased dangers have trimmed their ranks. New efforts aim to support and protect foreign freelance journalists.

By Bill Gentile

When former freelance foreign correspondent Arnaud Dubus early this year jumped to his death from a sky-train platform in Bangkok, his friends and colleagues were “devastated by his suicide” but called his death “symptomatic of the struggles thousands of foreign correspondents are facing around the world.”

In an article published in June in the Consortium News, members of the Union de la Presse Francophone (UPF), Thailand, a small community of French journalists in Bangkok, wrote about the loss of “a precious friend, a true fountain of knowledge on the culture and mysteries of Southeast Asia, and a sensitive and kind man.”

Titled “The Death of a Foreign Correspondent,” the article detailed the difficulties Dubus, a French journalist, had faced in the final years of his life. He had to change careers to maintain financial stability.

“Of course, nothing can ever fully explain Arnaud’s pain and the personal reasons that pushed him to make such a final decision. But we all know that his financial difficulties, especially in the past decade, affected him severely,” they wrote. “Even as he contributed to major French media outlets including Libération, Radio France Internationale and Le Temps for several decades, he could no longer make a decent living and was forced to change career last year.”

As the article points out, Dubus’ struggles are not unlike those shared by freelancers around the world. Considered some of the most valuable links in the informational chain between foreign countries and our TV or computer screens, freelancers also are the most vulnerable.

At this writing, I had just returned from a trip to Nicaragua where I attended celebrations marking the 40th anniversary of the Sandinista Revolution. While there, I interviewed freelance journalists for this story and for a series of stories in the Daily Beast.

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During the Contra War in the 1980s, Nicaragua was a hub for hundreds of freelance and staff journalists. Today only a handful remain, and they work under extraordinary conditions. The Sandinista government has closed most of the country's independent outlets. Journalists are attacked online and in the streets. Freelance journalists are asked by media outlets to cover events “on spec.” In other words, if something big happens, you should do a story. If not, don't bother — and we won't pay you for your time or effort spent in assessing the event.

Shifted landscape

I know a bit about freelancing, a craft that I have practiced on and off since 1977, when I headed to Mexico straight out of graduate school and where I lived for four years. I lived in Nicaragua from 1983 through 1990, again mostly freelancing. Today I teach a foreign correspondence course at American University in Washington, D.C., and, with the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, have helped fund student reporting trips to Mexico, Thailand, Laos, Borneo, Colombia, Peru and Guatemala.

The freelance landscape has shifted tremendously in the past few decades. When I moved to Mexico, the capital city was home to scores of staff and freelance journalists covering not just Mexico but also Central America and the Caribbean. But the number of both staff and freelance journalists based there has since declined, partly because the outlets for their work have downsized or disappeared, and partly because the region no longer produces a constant stream of news in which the U.S. market is particularly interested. The change in Mexico wasn't an isolated one. Beginning in the late 1980s, the number of full-time staff journalists posted in foreign cities to cover stories of global importance started to drop. Studies show this trend accelerated in the 2000s.

I recently launched a documentary series about how and why a new breed of freelance foreign correspondents is filling that void left by mainstream media retreating from news coverage abroad. Some of the forays into the craft have gone well, while others have not. Remember James Foley, Steven Sotloff, Austin Tice.

Journalism allies

Partly as a response to killings and kidnappings, we've seen the emergence of nonprofits like the London-based A



Jason Motlagh interviews PKK guerilla Egid Serhad at a checkpoint in Qandil, Iraq, on May 2, 2018. Photo by Balazs Gardi

Culture of Safety (ACOS) Alliance, an umbrella organization of various and same-minded groups designed to support freelance journalism.

According to the ACOS Alliance website, the organization “has developed the Freelance Journalist Safety Principles — a comprehensive set of practices for newsrooms and journalists on dangerous assignments aimed at embedding this culture of safety with international news organizations and the freelancers who work with them.”

“Thus far, the Freelance Journalist Safety Principles have been endorsed by nearly 100 organizations, including major TV networks, wire services, global and national NGOs, and journalist representatives,” the ACOS Alliance website states.

But none of the principles or practices laid out in the document is enforceable. None is binding. So while the document calls for decent and timely payment to freelancers for work done, the news outlet can either do so — or not.

Jason Motlagh

I consider Jason Motlagh to be the quintessential, and one of the most wildly successful, freelance foreign correspondents of our time. He is an award-winning writer, photographer and filmmaker. He is one of the Pulitzer Center's favorite grantees. He is kind and generous enough to Skype into my foreign correspondence

class at American University to share the secrets of his success with the next generation of aspiring freelancers. The 38-year-old has been a freelancer for the past 12 years.

During a recent interview, Jason told me he's seen “marginal changes” in the treatment of freelancers.

“I think overall, freelancing is now more precarious than it's ever been, and frankly I don't see a lot of meaningful changes on the horizon at this point. And I think some of that is a symptom of the business itself. Of journalism itself. There's so much penny pinching and concern for the bottom line that it's hard to think more holistically about safety and about the people that are taking great risks to gather this information on a daily basis. And so as far as those ideas becoming institutionalized and part of the actual culture, yes, I think there's more awareness that freelancers take inordinate risks. We're seeing what happens to them, but how do we as news organizations support them, protect them, while continuing to engage them rather than just not deal with them anymore, that's not been resolved.”

Frank Smyth

Motlagh's observations match those of most freelance support groups arguing that freelancers are a good value if treated as part of the coverage team and not



Independent journalist Bill Gentile, above, is the director, executive producer and host of the documentary series “FREELANCERS with Bill Gentile” where he introduces dedicated professionals searching for truth on the ground in some of the farthest corners of the Earth. Photo by Matt Cipollone

just as an auxiliary expense.

Frank Smyth is an independent, award-winning investigative journalist specializing in armed conflicts, organized crime and human rights overseas. In 2000, Smyth became the Washington, D.C., representative of the Committee to Protect Journalists. He later founded Global Journalist Security (GJS), training journalists and humanitarians operating in hostile environments around the world and within the United States.

In a recent interview, Smyth called the emergence of groups like the ACOS Alliance a positive step. But he also voiced some of the same concerns about the business of freelancing that Motlagh did.

“It's raising awareness within the community that there is a need that (has) to be filled. And that's a good thing,” Smyth said. “It's coming from the community itself. But we haven't figured out the magic solution, a solution to the crisis of journalism. That's what I think we have to keep in mind. We can't pretend that the crisis in freelancers is happening in a manner that isn't related to the crisis in journalism in general. That's really, I think, the challenge.”

“It's hard to pressure news organizations to provide proper support for freelancers when we're also up against the battle that news organizations have

been cutting back on foreign news to begin with,” Smyth said. “We want to encourage news organizations to treat people better, but also know that we want them to use their stuff at all,” Smyth said, meaning that if freelance support groups like his own push too hard for better treatment, then media outlets might reduce freelance participation — or just cut them off completely.

He concedes that finding that balance won't be easy.

“What I think could happen and I think might actually be a positive trend, once we get through the transition,” he said, would be that news organizations will have fewer staffers but “more freelancers and treating them better because that's how they are going to get the news,” he said. Smyth said this formula would work best for the recently formed news organizations like Vice, as opposed to the “legacy” outfits like The New York Times.

Back to Jason Motlagh. “We need to see more cohesion among freelancers, but really news organizations (have to) come together and say, ‘This isn't something we're doing for good PR, but that we really understand the value that freelancers provide to our news gathering that we just can't do with staff these days, the kinds of stories that we cannot dedicate real time and resources to gathering that

freelancers are predisposed to do, and we need to champion them and codify their rights within the organization and within the industry’.”

Organize

Motlagh's call for “more cohesion among freelancers” actually applies across the board to all journalists trying to survive. In a comprehensive and cogent argument written in The New Republic, “How to Save Journalism,” Clio Chang writes that unionizing is the path to victory in the struggle between journalism and Big Tech.

“...Union activism can help bridge the yawning power dynamic that now separates tech monopolies from the flailing media sector. Tech companies will have to feel threatened if they're going to implement reforms and meet media companies more than halfway — and the companies themselves clearly pose no threat at all. The way the media business works now is that Facebook and Google and Apple News reap the bulk of the profits produced by the labor of journalists — either by leapfrogging the ownership structure entirely or enlisting short-sighted owners, who mostly compete with one another, to give away their content for a pittance.”

Chang identifies “a new phenomenon, with expansive implications for the industry as a whole: a worker movement that spanned different companies and individual unions and included freelance journalists.”

“Just imagine what journalists could do if they could organize, informally or otherwise, across the industry,” Chang writes. “At the very least, unionization has raised awareness that industry-wide issues can be addressed via industry-wide organizing.”

At the end of the article about Arnaud Dubus' suicide, the authors write, “Arnaud the story-teller, a true bridge of intelligence linking Asia and Europe, has left us. We remain to watch part of our profession's spirit and ethics die along with him.”

Quoting poet Dylan Thomas, we journalists must make certain that we “do not go gentle into that good night.”

Ever. ■

Bill Gentile is an independent journalist and documentary filmmaker teaching at American University in Washington, D.C. He is the director, executive producer and host of the documentary series “FREELANCERS with Bill Gentile,” being distributed by the London-based Journeyman Pictures.