



PORTRAITS OF CHANGE



Portraits of Change

‘Portraits of Change’, which features stories of how journalists and activists have initiated change through use of media as part of EPRIE.Labs - Media and Social Change theme. The book features portraits of EPRIE alumni, but also other journalists and media persons from EPRIE countries. The outcome is a riveting account for media persons on how to initiate and measure change.

The portraits are first person accounts of journalists and media persons including digital journalists like YouTubers who have in their way brought about change in their neighbourhood, community, city or country. They tell their stories and demonstrate how they used media for change, including social media, new media and mainstream conventional media.

The portraits are interviews or one-on-one conversations in which change makers share their story: What tools they use to be successful? What challenges they faced and tackled? What are their top recommendations? How to deal with failures? How they financed their projects? What do they recommend for foreign journalists who are reporting on social change in other countries and are not yet familiar with the local situation? Through these accounts the book demonstrates how other journalists and media persons can use media for social change and how to navigate through the fast changing media landscape.

The book features conventional journalists who report on issues from their own cities and countries for mainstream publications, but also include for example YouTubers who are initiating change using unconventional methods like a web series or Instagram videos.

The accounts will inspire and help others do something similar and learn from the experiences of the people featured. Some basic guidelines that change makers talk about are: You must have a message – what’s your story, what’s the issue. It doesn’t matter if it’s clear, but it must evoke a reaction. How they focus on targeting. How they leave room for discussion – let the people speak and engage.

Table of Contents

Interview with Nina Gheddar (France)	4
Interview with Faizan Ahmad (Pakistan)	8
Interview with Afshin Ismaeli (Norway)	12
Interview with Esra Karakaya (Germany)	18
Interview with Jyoti Shelar (India)	22
Interview with Jakub Górnicki (Poland)	26
Interview with Sophia Xueqin Huang (China)	32
Interview with Paolo Borrometi (Italy)	38
Interview with Teodora Cvetkovska (Macedonia)	42
Interview with Katharina Finke (Germany)	48



Nina Gheddar

France

I have always been bothered by the abuse of language, when talking about migration

In Persian, 'Guiti' means 'the world and what surrounds it'. In France, it is the name of a young media house that intends to rethink the industry's treatment of the migration concern. It is the first "Franco-refugee" media. And Nina Gheddar is its editor-in-chief. After working with several French editorial offices for six years, the 31-year-old journalist left behind her experiences in the local press and television to launch this media firm whose slogan is "crossing views, crossing eyes". From the idea of an article to its production, everything is discussed in pairs. After nine months of gestation, the first team comprised refugee journalists from Syria, Chad, Pakistan and Cameroon as well as French reporters. Some left, others arrived. Today, Guiti News has its offices in Paris and has employed 20 people. Recently, the team has expanded to include English-speaking contributors, few of whom are based in countries such as Germany and England.

How did the idea of creating a newsroom combining French and refugee journalists come about?

It is the result of a meeting with six refugee journalists and three French journalists shortly before the summer of 2018. We shared two observations – one editorial and the other one, more social. We all thought, in our respective newsrooms, the coverage of migration issues was biased and problematic. This made us want to get journalists from different backgrounds to work together on these issues. The second thing was to realise that some of the refugees we were talking about were journalists. They had often left their country for this reason. But once they arrived in France, they had difficulty integrating into the job market.

What bothered you about the coverage of migration issues at that time?

It is a theme that has become present in the media since 2015. The media treatment was caricatural. One study summarises the three phases that followed one another and affected us as professionals, as well as readers. First, there was a phase of relative neutrality. Then, there was a phase of ecstatic humanitarianism, in particular after the publication of the photo of little Aylan, the Syrian child photographed lifeless, face down on a Turkish beach. Finally, after the Paris attacks in November 2015, there was a strong security security shift.

In concrete terms, what were the recurring problems?

I have always been bothered by the abuse of language, when talking about migration as with everything else. But as soon as we talk about this subject, we find an inappropriate vocabulary. Then there was a search for sensationalism in the coverage of these themes. We wanted to propose something different.

How did you go about it?

First of all, we took the gamble of working together. We wanted to change the narrative. We had to involve the whole team, from finding

the angle to producing the report to writing the article. This was important because we wanted to avoid dealing with these issues by confiscating the voice of the main stakeholders. Between 2015 and 2019, the term ‘refugees’ was used almost 35,000 times and in only 10 per cent of the cases was a refugee interviewed. It was obvious to us that by working in pairs with a refugee journalist, we could avoid this pitfall and enrich the viewpoints. It leads us to other angles, other ideas.

What are the main difficulties of working in pairs?

Let’s be honest, it’s a challenge. In terms of rhythm and efficiency, it’s not the easiest. Sometimes, there are language problems when someone is working in French or English, and it is not their mother tongue. Sometimes, there are misunderstandings, but we have been working together for more than three years now so we are learning to overcome these difficulties.

What subject has this approach enabled you to cover?

There are so many that it’s hard to choose one. You can already see a big difference in terms of networks and contacts. Both in the countries of departure and exile, on the migration routes and within the diasporas, it opens many doors. For example, as soon as the Covid-19 pandemic began, we became interested in refugees who sent money to their families, but were unable to do so or with less regularity. This was information that came to us through journalists in the newsroom.

How do you finance this unique journalistic model?

We are an association and can, therefore, access public subsidies. We have also received support from sponsors of private foundations that are in line with our values. Finally, and this is an important aspect, we are increasingly developing our self-financing: donations from readers, media education workshops in schools and a paying platform with access to privileged content by the end of 2021.

In recent years, media education has developed in French schools. How do you organise these interventions in pairs with a journalist in exile and a French journalist?

Most of the time, we propose three-hour interventions divided into two parts. First, a meeting during which the journalist in exile talks about his or her career and the difficulties he or she may have today in working in France. It is often the first time they meet a journalist in exile, or even a journalist at all. The second part really focuses on an analysis and deconstruction of the media narrative. We work a lot on fake news associated with migration.

How do teenagers respond to the migration issue based on the information they receive from traditional media ?

We always send them a questionnaire beforehand to find out a little about the level of the students and their relationship with the media, the way they use it. It's quite variable. But what changes the most is their own relationship to migration. We can have a morning intervention in a school in a rural area where migration is a theme that seems far from them. And in the afternoon, we find ourselves in a school in a sensitive urban area, where the pupils have much more to say because migration is a family heritage for them.

What are the next steps for Guiti?

We are getting closer to European media that works on the subject of migration and that question their way of working, but also to more inclusive media that do not hesitate to work with people with different profiles. The idea is twofold: to continue to produce our articles as we have done so far, but also to produce cross-border articles on migration issues with these media partners. Eventually, we would like to develop a charter of good journalistic practices. We are already working with the High Commissioner for Refugees on a guide for journalism schools and for the French media.

What advice do you have for good media coverage of migration?

First of all, we need a better knowledge of the subject, a better appreciation of what is at stake, and we should try to shift the focus so that we don't only cover the subject from the angle of hot news. We are also trying to create a glossary so that each term is used wisely, so that there is no more abuse of language. Finally, when it comes to interviews, there are good practices to develop. When you interview a person, who is recounting his or her migratory journey, the experience can be traumatic. As a journalist, you have to be aware of this and be attentive.

How can we ensure that this trauma is taken into account in the editorial offices?

We could imagine a code of conduct or internal rules aimed at anticipating these risks, by defining the best posture to adopt in the event of an interview with a traumatised person, and also a better choice of interviewers. Respect is essential, but it goes without saying. It is also important to explain to the interviewees that speaking out can have an impact on the media, and that it can therefore have consequences for them in their daily lives.

There have been several semantic debates in recent years about which term to use whether migrant, refugee, or exile. What is your opinion?

The semantic issue is enormous. We don't pretend to solve it. In our editorial office, we have several journalists who are themselves in a migration situation and they are the first to have divergent opinions. Some claim the label of refugee journalist as a political posture, others refute it wholesale. It is almost case by case. And it is constantly changing. What is certain is that we no longer use the word migrant too much. Some associations today prefer the term "newcomer" because it is the most inclusive possible. Why not? This is a subject where, in essence, things often evolve.



Faizan Ahmad

Pakistan



There is a different side to our country other than politics



Twenty-five year-old visual artist and photojournalist Faizan Ahmad had a tough journey establishing himself in the media world. From being a self-taught photojournalist – using only his mobile phone – to having his work published in international media such as The Guardian, BBC, and Al Jazeera, Ahmad has come a long way.

For Ahmad, not attending an art school wasn't an obstacle – it only motivated him more to practise photography every day and become a skilled photographer.

After acquiring the skills, Ahmad used his talent and combined it with his passion of telling stories to publish a book called “Lahore by Metro”, where through photography, he tells the stories of ordinary people living in the Pakistani city. And the results of his work have been outstanding, as the book has been praised by many notable authors and photographers around the world.

When and how you started off in journalism, media or activism. Did you have any particular goal in mind? Did you think that you would become this kind of journalist?

In 2013, I started working on a photo book and covering stories of local people for my blog. Some of the stories were so touching and I thought why not send one story to a local newspaper in Pakistan. The editor accepted the story and after having it published, it was the top story of the week, and I got an email from another newspaper to work for them as a freelancer. Nowadays, I am working as a guest photojournalist for 'The Guardian', 'BBC URDU', and on a story for 'Al Jazeera'.

Did you pursue a formal education before you began journalism or work as a media professional?

I am a photojournalist and I never picked up a camera before moving to Lahore in 2013 for studies. At the time, I had a cheap android phone and I started taking pictures on it as I did not own a camera. For a year, I experimented and practised to pick up the skill. I am entirely self taught. At the same time, I was frequenting public libraries in Lahore and reading through their art sections. I don't think I have left a photography book on those shelves unread. That is where I learnt the craft.

I also take inspiration from the Humans of New York photoblog. I am always more interested in the human subjects at the end of my lens, rather than the background, which they stand against. Brandon Stanton's work really resonated with me in that respect. Currently, I am based in Lahore.

How difficult has it been to break the mould and step out of the conventional margins for you? What advice would you give to others who are looking to take the plunge like you?

It was really difficult especially when I was studying how to teach children in school at my university and I was practising taking pictures and writing stories of people. In the beginning, I was not even sure until I won a gold medal at a university based in Lahore.

My advice for students is to be yourself and don't stress out too much. In addition to your work, make friends over the Internet with people who are great at things you are interested in. If you are interested in writing, find the topic of the other articles you are interested in and try to connect with the writer as well. Ask them questions about how to pursue it. If no one publishes your work, make your own platform such as Medium, write stories and share them regularly. You'll see how people will approach you to work for them. But it's a long process of learning each day.

Did some people or institutions inspire you? Do you have any role models? How are they and how did their work inspire you?

I always wanted to learn more about photos and depth of story, values and how to develop a project, but I never got a chance to attend an art school. The first chance to meet with fellow photographers was when I applied at the Pakistan Photo Festival, a fellowship programme. There, I connected with some mentors who worked for international publications, and they were helpful in so many ways.

Can you tell us about some high points of your work? Tell us about the times when your work was appreciated and boosted your morale. How important was this and how did it help you?

No one was publishing my book in Pakistan. But when I launched my book on Kickstarter, people from Oxford and Yale were suddenly backing the project. In Pakistan, this is the first self-published book project launched on Kickstarter and first book captured with a mobile phone camera.

During the campaign my book has been reviewed by national and international newspapers such as CNN, British Journal of photography, BBC Urdu, Metro.co, Hindustan Times, DAWN, Indian Express News, and Scroll.

Now, after the end of the Kickstarter campaign, the book has been shipped to 23 countries.

The Kickstarter project was backed by Brandon Stanton himself.

How do you measure the impact and reach of the work you do? Do you take social media seriously to measure impact?

I see this through my stories and posts on social media, and then seeing the feedback, and how people approach me to work with them or for them.

In the many years that you have been practising journalism or have been in the media, what has been the toughest moment? Can you elaborate or tell us about times when you felt you would give up?

I wanted to work as a photojournalist, but I did not have a camera. I started practising photography with a cheap android mobile (Sky 830). People commented under my pictures if those pictures are taken with a calculator. Those days, I was struggling with anxiety.

How did you come out of such a situation?

Practising every day helped me to understand the framing of photography. So, before I got a good camera I had gathered enough experience. I never attended an art school, but practising photography every day was the best school.

What is your motivation that keeps you going and continuing your work?

To provide a platform for common people, to voice their opinions. I want to play the role of the bridge between people's voices and the audience. I hope young people will see my book and be inspired. I was interviewed live on the news in Pakistan and I got so many calls from my village. People saw me and they said, "now we believe that you wrote a book", and I want those people to know that someone similar to them can do it, too.

How important is it for journalists and media persons to collaborate and cooperate with each other, to remain relevant and continue to expose wrong

doings and reflect what is really happening in our society?

I believe that it is important to make friends with people who are great at things that you are interested in. If you are interested in writing, find the topic of the other articles you are interested in, and try to connect with the writers as well, and ask them for advice.

What is the one key message that you want to give to other journalists/media persons who are trying similar things or students who are looking forward to joining the media?

I think that the most important message is illustrated through my goal - to report stories as told by my fellow passengers and to not allow my own voice to interfere with their storytelling. Through this journey, I've discovered that the most significant, most human experience is to speak to each other no matter which part of the world we come from.

How do you look at the rising intolerance and extremism of leaders and political parties against the media, free speech and freedom of the press?

I think that one of my goals is also to show that there is a different side to our country other than politics. And it's this side of Lahore, Pakistan. I wanted to show for a change, for example, two young boys offering their seats to two Sikh men on the bus because they are guests in their country, and where people are able to move past their differences and coexist with mutual respect and love.

There's a growing menace of fake news, hate speech and trolls that journalists/media persons have to face. Have you experienced being attacked and criticised for your work?

My response, as always, was to continually practise and get better at what I do.

By Bojan Stojkovski



Afshin Ismaeli

Norway

War is not a place to grow up

War photographer and reporter, Afshin Ismaeli, graduated with a Masters in Journalism from the University of Oslo. In 2003, he started to work as a journalist in Erbil, Iraq. Two years later, he covered the Iraq conflict. Since then, the 36-year-old journalist has spent his time documenting wars, conflicts, and humanitarian issues. He has worked on extensive photographic essays in Iraq, Syria, Iran, Turkey, Greece and Bosnia. In Iraq and Syria, he covered conflicts and war against the so-called Islamic state. He is, currently, a journalist and photographer with a Norwegian newspaper, 'Aftenposten'. Ismaeli's work has been published in international publications such as The New York Times, BBC, Foreign Policy and Wired. For Ismaeli, photography is a relationship, passion and life.

I found out that politicians are the problem, not the problem solvers.

I've read that you wanted to be a politician. What was your path to journalism?

I grew up in something like a military camp – a place for families of fighters. My father was a fighter and a member of a political party, which fought against Iranian government during the Iraq-Iran war. Of course, I was affected by it, and I wanted to be a politician to resolve the war problems. I never experienced a childhood. We were like adults – we knew about things a child shouldn't know. We were making weapons from branches to play. Once, we moved 20 times in the span of a month from one place to another, because of the bombings and airstrikes. War is not a place to grow up.

We had electricity for one or two hours a day, so we watched the Gulf War (1991) on TV. We saw journalists, photographers covering war in the Middle East. We saw people, who were underground, trying to give voices to others. There were few journalists who came to our area, too. Then in 2003, when the US invaded Iraq, we got more engaged in the issue. I learnt languages, and that pushed me in the direction of journalism.

I found out that politicians are the problem, not the problem solvers. So it's better to be the one who criticises the government, gives voice to children. Our voices have never been heard, when I was a child. No one knew what kind of situation we were in, how we grew up. I found that I can be a journalist to cover wars, conflicts by giving vo-

ice to the civilians, and in addition giving a voice to the voiceless, the main victims of the war.

So, what was your first real experience? You just appeared in the right moment at the right place?

I was really engaged in politics, society, so I was asked to start writing for some magazines and newspapers. It was a really interesting time, many organisations started working in Iraq, freedom of speech appeared to change the society. But in the end, it absolutely didn't work.

I studied literature and I worked after study, both fulltime. I worked until night. The first experience was really interesting.

When America invaded countries such Iraq and Afghanistan, as they set up many NGOs. They spoke about freedom of speech and women's rights. They funded a lot of organisations. After 20 years, we see what happens in Afghanistan. You cannot force democracy on a country with a weapon, when social or other things are not ready. The aftermath of Gulf War and what happened in Iraq and Afghanistan created a monster such as ISIS, Al-Qaeda, things that no human can imagine happened.

Do you feel journalism can make an impact?

Some kind of journalism can make small impacts when it comes to corruption. Recently, I interviewed someone like a commander of the Afghan army, and she mentioned that corruption is a bigger problem than the Taliban. Talibans flourish in corruption. It's the same in Iraq, Syria and Yemen. Here in Norway, I can see that my journalism can have an impact, not all the time, but sometimes. Politicians are afraid of journalists. In the Middle East, believe you me, no one cares. If you're doing investigative reporting, and try to criticise people in power, they will kill you. So many journalists have died because of this in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria. Many people are afraid to do that, those countries have terror laws, and they can easily stop you as a terrorist. The law that should protect journalists is weak. All syndicates, NGOs,

and organisations who support journalists belong to a party, and politics.

So is it safer to live in Norway and cover the Middle East with European support?

While working for Norwegian media I feel safe most of the time, but not all. Because I am from that area, it's easy to be stopped, no one knows what independent reporting is. They might think that you're working for the intelligence service, or you have some connections, but they don't really care what you're writing about in European media.

I feel safer working for the Norwegian media, I know that I have a government here, an agency that supports me - if something happens to me, they are there.

But when I am sitting here in safe Norway, I wonder what I am doing here, when things are happening in Mosul, in Raqqa. It's not easy. Some people call it junkie, some call it adrenaline. I think we got addicted to war, most of us. You want that adrenaline, running, skipping. Most of us, people working there, have the same feelings.

For you it might be a bit different, because you were born in a conflict zone. You already knew how to behave or what you can expect in a specific area.

I didn't choose it at that time, but now I choose it by myself. That's the difference.

Of course, I've been affected by my childhood, those experiences became part of my life. Right now, I could stay here in Norway, have a quiet job, but it's interesting to go back there. I know languages, I know people that sometimes allow me to go and visit places where no one can go— like camps for ISIS families in Syria. When I was there in 2016-2017, no one knew about that place. I could write many unique stories.

I have also been arrested many times. I was in a Turkish prison in 2016. I was tortured in a prison – one week in a cell – because I am from there, because I'm a Kurd. I've been interrogated as a terrorist in Iraq and Syria many times.

War is happening even if I'm there or not. But when I'm there, I can make civilians be heard.

There are some situations, when you witness tragedy, and you see people who really need help. How does one act as a journalist in such moments?

It depends if you can be of help there. In 2016, when I was on the frontline in Bashiqa (Iraq), I was with a group of female fighters and the bomb landed exactly where we were. One girl died; another was injured. It was so difficult, I had a camera in one hand, and carried the girl with the other.

You are there to document, but you are human as well. Sometimes, even if you could take the best picture, you would rather choose to help, if you can. Sometimes, you can't. When I was in Afrin (Syria) in 2017, in an area only journalists could cross in and out, people were approaching us asking to take their babies with us to the other side, just to save them. But you can't do that, it's not ethical. You're not an aid organisation.

What is the reward for your job? Is it a conviction that you told a story that the world needed to hear?

My job is documenting, and that documentation will be part of the history of humankind, for humanity. Without journalists – brave people doing their job – we wouldn't know what ISIS did

in Mosul, in Raqqa; what happened to the children, civilians. How many journalists were in the Vietnam war? We lost many pictures; moments journalists could document. Documentation helps us remember politicians who did this. What NATO did in Afghanistan, in Libia, Iraq...War distracts people, destroys cities, kills mothers, fathers, children. No one wins at war. That's the message we want to send out to people. That's the sense of documenting. And also, to make people appreciate the safe lives they lead. Sometimes, we are pessimistic, we are in despair because no one cares. No matter what, we just do our job, that's part of our social responsibility.

Is that your motto? Giving voice to the voiceless?

War is happening even if I'm there or not. But when I'm there, I can make civilians be heard. Many stories and voices come out, thanks to journalists covering different angles of war. I hope that it can bring change, influence politicians, even though it looks like it doesn't.

Is there a way to protect yourself while covering conflicts?

You can follow some routines, check the cars, have a good driver you can trust, wear a helmet and a safety vest. We can use offline maps, check the Internet and information to know the area. Now, I walk like a local in Syria and Iraq.

Do you care about your mental health? You see sometimes the worst cruelty...

You have to forget about all those things. If you don't forget, you will go crazy.

What about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)?

Yes, all of us suffer from PTSD. We live in the middle of dead bodies, shootings and killings. We are just like soldiers. It's better to know the situation and try not to concentrate on that. Try to live normally and solve it with yourself, otherwise you will go crazy. I try to think that what I'm doing

is important, at least for some people. Hopefully, my reports can change something. I can give voice to the voiceless. I believe in journalism. That helps me to be strong and face all that cruelty.

Did you have a moment when you almost lost your faith in journalism?

When I was in a Turkish prison, I thought that those were my last days, and I will never work as a journalist again. I've spent a week there – a very tough week; I was stuck in a cell, alone, being tortured. I didn't know, if anyone knew I was there. They bit me a lot saying that I was trying to escape even though there was no way to do that. I decided to not work as a journalist again. But when I got out of jail, I gave myself a four-to-five-month break. But when I saw something happening, I just had to get back to journalism.

It's like a magnet, whatever happens you want to be there.

Did you ever feel excitement when you break a news story?

Yes, I worked on many stories like that, investigative ones. Are you familiar with a book called "Two Sisters" by Åsne Seierstad? It's earned a bestselling position by 'New York Times'. It's about two Somali sisters, who went to Syria to join ISIS. The author of this book never met these two girls, this story was really famous in Norway, not only there. Nobody knows what happened to them at the end of ISIS, I managed to find them in one of the camps for ISIS families, and I was the only journalist who met them.

In the same camp, in 2019 in Afrin, I investigated and found five orphan children, whose parents were killed by ISIS, their mother was from Norway. That was a really big story in Norway. The government sent a private jet to send those kids back to Norway. That story changed their lives from that hell camp – the worst disaster with around 70, 000 people of ISIS families, where kids are brainwashed and became fighters of Islamic State in the future – to bring them here, to Norway. I visited them here, I saw how their lives changed, how they go to school and are part of society here.

Many dictators are using social media, and they're spreading their agenda and fake news.

It feels good sometimes. You help some people at the end. Everyone wants such big things, but it's not like I'm working for it.

You have been working as a journalist since 2005. A lot has changed during over these 16 years because of social media. How do you view social media and its influence?

Social media has changed many factors. It brought about a huge change. Now you can do much more with one tweet. You can get inspired by others or be an inspiration. That's amazing. Of course, there are drawbacks. Fake news, for one, is a huge challenge.

Do you notice that fake news is influencing the way that people are looking at democracy in the Middle East?

It depends on the people. I think in Norway, especially, they don't trust social media. They trust newspapers or traditional media more than a post somewhere on social media. It depends, because somebody like Trump, of course could change, endanger democracy. He's got like, a million followers. And in the end, they have to stop him. It can affect the democracy. Many dictators are using social media, and they're spreading their agenda

and fake news. How the big social media houses such as Twitter and Facebook are trying to stop them is a big issue.

And that can affect the other side: what can happen with the freedom of speech? It's so controversial. Do you believe in total freedom of speech? What about hate speech? All these factors can affect the democracy and the freedom of speech of course. Can anyone use hate speech and create hate posts on Instagram or Facebook? Maybe, they are right? It's so difficult with fake news and hate speech. And of course, others, like pedophiles who are using the social media, and other issues.

Would you be able to share some thoughts with young journalists or people who want to follow your path?

Try to be with the people, and for the people. It's about them, it's about the war victims. We are there because of them, and we try to cover their stories, be as close as possible. It's important to be careful in the area. It's important to do your job, and security should come first. Never be a junkie and put yourself in danger for a story. I mean 'life danger'. It isn't worth it, if you die. Who's going to cover that?

* This conversation took place three weeks before the Talibans seized control over Afghanistan on August 15, 2021



Esra Karakaya

Germany



Conversations about the most vulnerable were missing in mainstream media



Berlin-based video journalist Esra Karakaya (26) sees herself as being part of the alternative media scape. With people disillusioned with mainstream media during the Covid-19 pandemic and the ensuing lockdown, many turned to alternative media for news and information. Between 2017 and 2018, she developed an online talk show, 'Black Rock Talk', named after the literal translation of her surname. She continued as 'Karakaya Talk' since 2019. Having reported on people and issues that "usually do not have a say in the German media landscape", Karakaya feels that alternative media has played an important role in covering the pandemic. She suggests that gamification of data is needed.

Excerpts from the conversation:

What has been the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on alternative media? how have you seen the media scape change?

We have also reported on coronavirus, but from a different perspective. I just worked on a show asking questions on whether we need some de-growth to sustain ourselves in the coming decades and centuries. So we spoke about that topic and it was a lot of fun. We had three different people with different views on this topic. Because of coronavirus we can't go to the studio, so we produced it over zoom. So you see Covid-19 does impact us too. Not just topics, but even the circumstances that we work under.

If big media houses are not able to understand why it is important to speak to the heart of the people, it will be a lost cause.

What do you think was missing from the coverage in mainstream media?

Conversations on the most vulnerable were missing. We saw many reports but conversations about who those people were missing. We're talking about how this is affecting the economy and other things. So many people were challenged, but we don't talk. There are so many people whom we depend on. They are system relevant but have not found space in the media. They are the ones

who are essential to the system, and they are the ones who are paid the least. If they don't work, then the entire system will collapse. These are the foot soldiers of the system. There was a lot of focus on data driven journalism, which was nice. I loved the graphics and visuals that were used to make data more interactive.

Do you feel that there was little coverage for other issues during the early months of the pandemic?

There was nothing, but Covid-19 in the early months. There was absolutely no space for anything but Covid-19. But that's not the trust, right? There were other things too. All I could see on my phone was Corona. One question is, why was Corona the only headlines that we had in the first phase. I think this was the decision taken by publishing houses. I think I wanted to ask why this was done and what about representation to the most vulnerable in the system. Representation of the most vulnerable was less, this is always the case, and it was the same in Covid. I mean there were the odd stories but there was no lasting conversation on this. Now we're talking about how to get back on track, but those conversations were missing in the beginning. Our core focus has always been the other side. I strongly believe that this is the only model that will work and help media sustain. If big media houses are not able to understand why it is important to speak to the heart of the people, it will be a lost cause. They will have to adapt.

We have seen many people questioning mainstream media more. Why do you think this is happening?

People are questioning public broadcasting stations much more than before now. The legacy media is being questioned, too. In a way it is worrisome, because if we can't agree on facts, then we can't agree on anything. I think those who are questioning mainstream media are those who felt that they were not seen or heard in this media before. So now that we have social media, the power dynamic has shifted. This is good, it is putting pressure on big media houses to not

Gamification of data is the way forward. Information can't be so dry anymore. It has to be more interactive.

be so dominant about their own media narratives. It is pushing them to become more human centric and more audience centric and cater to the demands of the audience.

Did you face any kind of censorship?


Even though we are independent and alternative we are still connected with the public broadcasting houses and institutions. So we were near to them because of our network and affiliation. So we didn't see any kind of censorship. I'm not sure about others. I think people will be more interested in positive stories. A lot is not going to change. I think once this is over, people will go back to their life and say that this was something that happened. I'm not sure if this will impact the way we consume media. I'm assuming that those who have seen public media or mainstream media, they will stay there. Those who consume alternative media, will continue to do that. I don't see any big shift in viewership patterns.

How do you think media engagement can be increased?


Information gamification is needed. The role of alternative media becomes important, especially now. Data journalism was needed in the first phase. Then it was easy and basic, but now this is not interesting anymore. People don't want to see numbers anymore. I think the data needs to be more interactive and even gamified. Gamification of data is the way forward. Information can't be so dry anymore. It has to be more interactive. All the mainstream media are in the same zone, there is not much difference in the coverage. Media was supportive of the government because Corona is a health issue, they have a responsibility to check what the government does. But there are many topics that are not linked to Coronavirus and people are interested in that, too. We are covering Corona, but in the future, we will not cover it so much. It will play a part in the conversation, but it won't be the main focus.



Jyoti Shelar
India



The Covid-19 pandemic broke all barriers of access and information



Jyoti Shelar is a senior Mumbai-based journalist. She is currently a health correspondent with an Indian national daily, Hindustan Times. The 36-year-old has previously worked with Indian daily publications such as the 'Mumbai Mirror' and 'The Hindu' as well as contributed to international publications including the 'Washington Post'. Shelar has extensively covered the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in India. Her reportage included hard news coverage, breaking stories, data driven articles as well as human interest features. According to Shelar, who has been a health reporter in India for over a decade, the pandemic dispelled several perceptions of journalism, and the way news was delivered and consumed.

Journalists must not feel that they are not experienced enough to report on any subject.

Excerpts from the interview:

What has been the biggest challenge in terms of on the ground reporting and news gathering?

Travelling was the biggest challenge. This was the first time that reporters like me could not reach the spot and report from the field. I could not access or reach any hospital. Even if I did manage to reach, I had to protect myself with the right gear. But in terms of information, I think Covid-19 changed things completely. Information became more accessible. Also, the way authorities communicated changed. They were not used to talking to media via video calls or having an online press conference. But they did all of this. The government authorities changed their ways of functioning. It was a big change. This was unimaginable in the past.

What about the use of social media?

You are one of the journalists who uses social media extensively. Did it have any positive impact on your way of working?

I would say social media had a positive impact because you get access to plenty of information. In fact, Covid-19 pandemic broke all barriers of access and information. But the social media has its pitfalls. With the avalanche of information that you are provided with on social media, you have to constantly battle fake news and misinfor-

mation. During the pandemic, a lot of misinformation was doing the rounds, especially regarding diagnosis and treatment. That was a big problem. As journalists, we should be able to bust fake news, but my worry was about the general public that has access to this information on social media. They are vulnerable. So fake news and misinformation was a big problem.

Can you revisit some of the most impactful stories that you reported on the Covid-19 pandemic in India?

In the beginning of the pandemic, I wrote an in-depth piece on a group of travellers who returned to Maharashtra. They brought coronavirus to the various cities of the state. So I spoke to these people who returned and were the first ones to go into quarantine. It was all new for the patients, the authorities and for me as well. So this was one of my first. Later I wrote a story on Dharavi, Asia's largest slum. It was already making headlines globally. The world was watching Dharavi and everything you wrote about it became important. I also wrote a story on (please name this hospital) the city's Covid-19 hospital that did deliveries of Covid-19 infected mothers. They did the highest number of deliveries during the lockdown (How many months?). So this was a special story because the doctors were worried, fearing that the babies would also be Covid-19 positive. Luckily, that didn't happen.

Do you think there were some missing elements in the Covid-19 media coverage in India?

I don't want to criticise anyone, but in the initial days, there was a lot of change in policies and processes. For instance, all decisions were being taken locally for testing, quarantine norms, as well as treatment protocol. This became difficult for reporters to first process and then publish the correct information in a constant state of flux. It also became confusing for people to understand. So this was a big problem. It created a sense of chaos and that led to more panic. But later on, things improved and cleared out.

With the avalanche of information that you are provided with on social media, you have to constantly battle fake news and misinformation.

What is the most important lesson that you have learnt during the pandemic? Did you acquire any new skills?

Writing became extremely important. You had to appeal to a global audience. And one of the skills that I picked up was to learn to write in a manner that appeals globally. I have been reporting on health issues for a long time, but when I reported on the pandemic, there was global interest on what was happening in India because of the huge population we have and the challenges that it poses. I also learnt to access information in different ways. My source pool also became more wider than before. I am now in touch with far more health experts and doctors than I used to be.

Are there any stories that you would like to revisit?

There is no particular story, but initially when I was doing daily reporting, things were scattered. I would like to go back to some stories, which

I couldn't report in a way that I wanted to due to lack of time. I would like to revisit some important aspects like how slum pockets with high TB patients and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on them since both these diseases affect the lungs. There was a fear of TB and Covid-19 intreating at some point in time. I would like to go back to see how this actually panned out.

Do you have any suggestions for young journalists who are interested in health journalism?

I don't have a medical degree or background. But I have reported on health, based on my sources. Journalists must not feel that they are not experienced enough to report on any subject. All journalists must be open to write on a range of subjects. Over the years, I have managed to write on complex subjects. Health journalism has, of course, become much more important now and I believe that it will stay that way. It has come into serious focus.



Jakub Górnicki

Poland

Journalism is neutral. Context changes everything

Warsaw-based Jakub Górnicki has a passion for new media, multimedia reporting and journalistic projects. He has worked as well as advised media outlets in Georgia, Turkey, and West Africa. The 35-year-old journalist, who works across Ukraine, Belarus and the Balkans, has taught multimedia reporting at the Georgian Institute of Public Affairs in Tbilisi. For over six years, he managed the ePaństwo Foundation, where he was responsible for projects related to data journalism, social technology and strategy. In 2017, he set up journalism start-up – an international service – Outriders, along with his wife Anna Górnicka. Their headquartered in Warsaw, but they define themselves as a global organization. “We say about ourselves that we cover global issues, which have local impact,” he adds. Outriders has won many prestigious awards including the Best Documentary 2021 award at the Media Film Festival in Philadelphia for the film, “Belarus”. He also received the ICFJ Covid Reporting for the comic “Favela vs. Covid”.

What does your work entail?

We are trying to solve several problems. First, access to information that affects local communities and societies, even if the events are not taking place in the given country. For instance, the fires in the Amazon that have significantly changed Poles' attitude towards the climate crisis. It is an interesting phenomenon because the whole scene took place in another continent. However, through technology, it became a kind of local news, discussed and related to local politics. Following breadcrumbs, we found that we actually exist – as humans – in a paradigm, in which local issues are very much mixed up with global issues. At times, it's challenging to differentiate them. The US Presidential elections, for example, are experienced by nearly three-fourth of the world. Since 2015, we have observed that the migration crisis significantly affected the parliamentary elections in Poland. This country is accepting zero refugees and that became a highly heated and intensely polarising topic. We are trying to look ahead to the future – analyse the issues, fears and needs of people.

Context changes everything.
That's why we should strive for objectivity.

In other words, you're trying to identify actual needs, not their survey statements.

This is the kind of thing that is easier to talk about at the pitch level than to actually implement, which doesn't change the fact that we are collecting more and more of these instruments. These

needs are the hardest to identify, because it's about detecting, not whether someone wants a new iPhone, but whether someone has communication problems. Tracking human needs allows someone to ask a politician concrete questions. Then, the media fulfills its mission. A journalist is a profession of public trust. People trust them, because they do some work on their behalf, not because they duplicate politicians' tweets.

Our project "Radar" from 2020 is a perfect example – an attempt to take a constructive approach to the effects of Covid. Searching for answers around the world with the help of five reporters who, with the entire community, collected a total of over a 1000

different ideas on how to deal with the various effects of Covid. It's also an example that when looking for solutions, there's no need to close yourself off to your own country.

Another issue is trying to help people. On the one hand, our role is to interpret the world, but behind that is understanding the processes.

You often say that information binds society together.

In my opinion, the key issue here is that journalists' primary goal is to help make society better. Information has to be used for society to develop and to have a clear picture of the situation. Negative information is also important – the fact that we know someone is stealing is also a good piece of information. It is like finding out that you are sick. Unpleasant information, but good to know. And from populists we would learn that everything is okay, because the truth is not needed.

When journalistic standards are challenged, when there is a division between the media of one side and the other side, which have established certain canons of perceiving the world, the information is formatted in terms of a particular perception, whether the media

is right-wing, liberal, or left-wing. Journalism is neutral. Context changes everything. That's why we should strive for objectivity. I define it a little bit like Catholics define heaven – you can discuss

how much it exists. But generally, a good way for me is to believe that it exists and to strive for it.

For a dozen years or so, we've seen these processes taking place – the ease of giving an opinion, the mixing of an opinion with information than actually giving an

opinion. Grinding information to give an opinion is terrible. It doesn't respect people. You have to assume that people are smart. People are able to come to certain conclusions

based on information or discuss it with someone else. If they want to, they will then seek an opinion. The moment we get an opinion that this is good, and this is bad, we don't really have any space for discussion. We could laugh in Poland that there was no debate before the parliamentary elections. But we see the US, where the debates were important historically, and at the same time, it turns out that after Trump's first debate journalists started to say – 'let's not have another debate, if Trump behaves like that'. This was another break in something that was supposed to allow people to form an opinion about a particular candidate.

There is a big gap between what journalists do and what people's actual needs are. And this gap is being filled by organisations dedicated to engaging journalism spread across the world. What exactly is this "movement"?

It's the kind of journalism that engages people to understand them. It's still hard for me to say if this is a movement, because it's not like we as an organisation are part of some group. My impression is that these organisations come into being because there is a noticeable need. The mainstream has to let it go.

The mainstream in other countries looks different. However, it is attached to the world of politics and news. It should be noted that over the years, it has optimised its business differently and now it is not efficient enough, for example, to send 15 journalists to Belarus. No, because there are no talents at the moment. The training within the organization definitely doesn't work in this case.

When you go from the 'Washington Post' to the 'New York Times', it's a bit like going from the Apache to the Sioux.

Speaking globally – all small organisations are solving a problem. Outriders tells global stories with strong visuals, Romanian DoR (Decât o Revistă) does great events, or Bellingcat that does investigations and has a whole network of distribution partners but doesn't do outreach.

When working with large media outlets, you show them that reader engagement and interest can be built differently, by showing important content, not doodles. What Outriders emphasises is sharing knowledge in media environments.

This was something that guided me from the beginning of founding Outriders - the education system. For me, as a person who comes from completely different fields – from the blogosphere, from marketing, from the civic sector – the standard is to share knowledge. You attend a conference, and you talk about everything. And when you enter the journalism world, which is brought up in fierce competition. In my opinion, there is no educational component in journalism at all. Studies are average, authorities in a polarised country do not serve their function. This is a glo-

bal issue –journalists are and have been raised in a culture of fighting among themselves. When you go from the ‘Washington Post’ to the ‘New York Times’, it’s a bit like going from the Apache to the Sioux.

Because the news was important and who’s going to deliver it first?

The first issue is news, the second issue is the fight for money. This is extremely wrong, because it’s harmful to people. You can compete with each other on the basis of giving each other a leg up, then we all fall down, or you can compete constructively by sharing knowledge. Today, it goes better for me, and tomorrow, it goes better for you. And we all develop. This applies to all forms of cooperation. For example, a situation that would be okay for all media and no one would lose out on, it would be for large editors from different media to join forces on Covid and generate shared content.

In 2015, when we were dealing with the migrant crisis, all the newspapers published a one-page guide – one consistent message for everyone.

Putting out consistent messages might better serve people if these resources were pooled together, and on the same hand, it would be a signal that this industry cares about people. That’s a unique situation and normal rules don’t apply here. But unfortunately, there is no community thinking, instead fighting over who will have whom on their programme. In Poland, we have the Association of Polish Journalists, which has been taken over by the right-wing, polarised authorities, quarreling media fights for existence. They don’t even go out for a beer together - to put it simply. There is no flow, there are no relations.

Outriders created a Mixer - a platform of information and knowledge exchange with media organisations.

We are already training the big players more frequently. Mixer is also information for people

who pay us money that we share this knowledge with. When you pay us 50 Euros, for example, you know that we’re not only sharing content, but that whatever know-how we acquire by creating that content will be used by other journalists.

We are moving out of mass public, open Twitter communication and into the world of closed groups, which I think is more humane.

As I scroll through your Facebook, there’s not a crazy number of likes under posts there. What do you think of what’s happening on Facebook right now?

I think Facebook no longer exists. There’s Messenger. Facebook already started telling publishers a year-and-a-half ago that as a news feed it was dying. After Cambridge Analytica, they are not able to deal with this wave of disinformation. At this point, Facebook has groups and profiles that are private and small. We are moving out of mass public, open Twitter communication and into the world of closed groups, which I think is more humane. Google Plus put out a 200-page study where they showed how people function in groups. Now Facebook is Google Plus. This is also

helping the media find each other better – people are starting to engage in discussion. We also see that the new generation rejects open communication.

How do you think that this will affect the functioning of the media?

Eventually, the media will have to start making an effort. The previous approach made everyone lazy. You will have to get closer to people. Now during the pandemic, it is different in general. For the media, this is a champion's time. You can gain a lot, or you can lose a lot.

I get the impression that Outriders has emerged from you.

For sure. This is the second organisation that emerged from me. The first was ePaństwo. Talking about what you love and what you believe in and convincing people of that is a simple job. You just sometimes have to go far and have a plan for it. There is a lot of strategy involved in this walk. Always write out some goals. I define the people who I know I am going to have to build a relationship with for a longer time, or the ones

For the media, this is a champion's time. You can gain a lot, or you can lose a lot.

I am going to have to build a relationship with for a shorter time. I know that many donors decide at the relationship level to give money. A proposal is one thing. A nice proposal is relatively easy to write. Many donors invest relatively relationally. You have to prove yourself, approach once, twice, three times.

What drives you?

Faith that it will somehow work out.



Sophia Xueqin Huang

China

“They told my friends
and students they
must not talk
to Sophia, she’s
an evil force”

Chinese journalist Sophia Xueqin Huang, who was arrested in October 2019 and was moved into residential surveillance after being released from prison topped the list of “10 Most Urgent” list of journalists whose press freedoms were being suppressed or whose cases are seeking justice published by One Free Press Coalition, a united group of pre-eminent editors and publishers using their global reach and social platforms to spotlight journalists under attack worldwide in December 2019. The 32-year-old feisty journalist was detained in Guangzhou, in Guangdong province, for the ambiguous charges of “picking quarrels and provoking trouble,” ostensibly in retaliation for her coverage of the Hong Kong protests and ongoing gender discrimination in China. Despite the hardships she suffered over the last two years, Sophia is firm that it is her obligation and duty to tell the people and the government what is wrong and what can be improved. The lack of democracy and freedom of expression won’t work forever, and one can’t rule a country like that. She cautions journalists working in dangerous environments to get their facts right and make no mistakes.

It is not my job to praise you. It is our obligation and duty to tell you what is wrong and what can be improved.

Excerpts from the conversation:

You've had a tough time over the last two years, but you have pulled through. What was experience in detention?

I was under Residential Surveillance at a Designated Location (RSDL) which is a form of detention regularly used by authorities in the People's Republic of China against individuals accused of endangering state security. I didn't have access to a lawyer. I felt like I was in an island. I was terrified and lonely. Once you are under detention you don't know how long they will keep you. They can keep you at least for six months.

Do you still feel the trauma of the time spent in detention?

Yes, I suffer from trauma. Every time the dog barks, I feel scared that they are coming to pick me up. Imagine, they booked me for picking quarrels and creating trouble. They charged me for inciting people to subvert state power. This is what they use to target journalists. But all I did was just write an article on what was happening. How could I endanger state power? They made a lot of enquiries with my parents and former editors. They called me for having tea at a cafe, they were officials from the government. They asked me about the 'Me Too' movement, since

I wrote many articles about sexual harassment of students at universities by professors. This led to a movement of sorts and there was outrage at the scale of this harassment. After my investigative stories appeared in the media, a senior professor was sacked and this 'Chinese Me Too' movement echoed all over the world and even the international media took note and picked it up. This was the first time that China came under the scanner for the 'Me Too' movement. This was real change happening. But I guess, the government did not appreciate this. They used the RSDL to isolate me and transform my mind.

How were the enquiries, was there any kind of torture?

They tried to brainwash me; I didn't suffer from physical torture, but I suffered from mental torture. They wanted me to believe that everything in China is good and believe that the Chinese model is better than the democratic model. They told me to see how much we have progressed. But I told them too, and I firmly believe that I'm a journalist and it is my job to criticise the government to expose the wrongdoings. It is not my job to praise you (the government). It is our obligation and duty to tell you what is wrong and what can be improved. Lack of democracy, freedom of expression, won't work forever, they can't rule a country like that forever. In fact, I am the one who really likes China the most. At one point, there were 28 policemen trying to brainwash me, I was arguing with them all the time.

There was a time, when I said I don't want to talk to you, take me to court or kill me.

I felt so tired, and they tried to tire me out, persuade me to believe into their view of China and the world. After a month or two, I stopped arguing with them.

How does the legal process work? Didn't they take out to court for a trial?

They didn't bring me to court, because they didn't have any evidence. I am so clean. But they tracked all my bank accounts, but I had such little income. They did not get anything against me. They

checked everything, they even asked my former editors and colleagues about my leanings and earning. Since I was freelancing for some time now, they checked all payments I received. They went to the extent of asking all my friends, to go against me, but no one went against me. In the end there was no charge against me that they could prove. They even stopped me from entering events. Once, they stopped me from entering a building where a consulate was holding an event. They stopped me before entering the building and they told me I was on the 'list'. They told me that because I was on the list, I couldn't enter any foreign property and the consulate was foreign property. They even stopped me from delivering any lectures at universities, even the university where I studied journalism. They told my friends and students they must not talk to Sophia, she's an evil force. They told all the students not to be misused by Sophia.

Based on your experiences, what advice would you give to journalists who are working in vulnerable circumstances, in many countries where freedom of the press, speech and expression is shrinking?

These are tough times for journalists. We should not get anything wrong, we must fact check everything before we publish. We have to be clean. This is the only thing that can protect you. I didn't work with any foreign force, or any NGOs linked to any other country, so they couldn't link me to anything and charge me with any serious allegation. To challenge the government, you have to be clean. They tried to defame me. They talked to my friends all the way up to kindergarten and primary school, but they didn't find any skeletons in my closet. This is the only way they can protect themselves.

What are the restrictions that you face now?

I can't leave mainland China. I have to wait for a year. After a few months from December 2020, I will get back documents according to the law, but I don't know when that will happen. If they

don't give me back my documents, then I will sue them. I am applying to universities in the UK. I can go back to Hong Kong now, but I don't want to go there.

Your reported about the Hong Kong protests. Was that the trigger for detaining you?

I guess something was building up for a long time after the 'Me Too' movement reports. The HK protests were the trigger, they thought that I had overstepped the line. I was also doing a lot of investigative reporting on corruption by officials. All these articles were also troubling the government. I was the only journalist in mainland China who used her real name. I dared to challenge the authority

And dared to use my real name. I have still not apologised to them. The fact that I used my real name was a big trigger. If I used a penname, there would not have been such a huge impact. With my real name, the distant story became a real story and people could relate to it and believe it.

I was the only journalist in mainland China who used her real name.

Are you still planning to continue journalism?

If I get a chance, I will still do the same. Actually, during the interrogations, they kept asking me the same question. I told them I don't regret what I have done and will still do the same. But after

spending so many months in deletion, I feel sad and disappointed about the legal system in China. When I was abroad, so many friends told me not to go back to China. In fact, I was on a flight to China, when a senior journalist asked me to stop at the airport; he told me, I will be jailed. But I never thought that I will be jailed. I had some faith and hope in the legal system. I thought I did nothing wrong, and I won't be treated in an unjust manner. But they still jailed me for three months and they had no evidence. They used some bogus charge to keep me in jail for three months. Law is a tool for them to subvert the people.

Do you still believe in the power of journalism?

Media surely still has a lot of power, but in many societies it has become a mouthpiece of the government. They can do anything they want. I'm very disappointed at the legal system. I had faith in it. People told me I will go to jail, and I told them that I won't. But in the end, I was proven wrong, and they were right. I now listen to people. The reality of today's times has taught me this. I used to think that the system can improve, and we can change it to make it better. But this is becoming increasingly difficult. People in power want to safeguard their own interests. Democracy is now what they (those in power) want, they don't want freedom of speech, they don't want rule of law but rule by law. In HK, rule of law is a joke. In Hong Kong, I was only writing what I saw with my eyes. There was only fake news being published in mainland China. They were not showing the reality. They were labelling the Hong Kong protests as anti-China violent protests, seeking independence for Hong Kong. The protests were anything but that. They were telling the false stories in mainland China, and I felt that it was my obligation to tell the people that this wasn't true. I just did that. I used my real name to lend credibility to my writing. I wrote what I saw, not what I imagined. I felt the pepper spray on my face and the water cannon. This was just plain spot reporting. I had the option to remain quiet, but I couldn't. Despite the gloom in the media, in HK and China, there is still hope for journalism. Freedom doesn't come for free. In HK, there is some space for me-

dia freedom and fair journalism, but it is shrinking fast. They are now jailing journalists. A lot of news shows are banned.

What about mainland China?

In mainland China, there is no news, no journalism anymore. That is why I'm disappointed and sad. Some people are doing some work, but there are few of them remaining and are keeping their faith in journalism. I'm writing using a pen name to survive. I need money to survive and I'm publishing in foreign outlets. But after the detention life is tough. Every month, they check the surveillance cameras in the apartment which they have installed. I need to ask permission to leave the city, even to go to Shanghai.

What do you plan to do now?

Because of all the cases, I can't be a lawyer or journalist anymore in mainland China. They offered me a civil servant's job, but I said no. I will teach and take up academics, I can't get a lawyer's licence due to the cases against me. I must tell you that many people supported me. I won't stop what I am doing. It may not be in the same form, but my work may take another shape or form. It was my duty to tell the truth and I won't stop telling it.

Tell me more about the Hong Kong protests.

I can't let go of what I saw in HK, I never imagined this in modern China. HK is an international city, financial hub, everyone was stunned to see what was happening.

People were so angry with tear gas. Young people were so angry. They were worried about their future. They asked me to delete my articles. But they are still online, and I haven't deleted any article even now. I saw a place with democracy, freedom of speech and how it was crushed by China. How could they crush such a city? We thought they won't go so far due to the international media pressure. But we now realised that they don't care about how they are perceived internationally anymore. In Hong Kong, we saw the real face

I want to live with dignity and with freedom of speech with diversity.

of the government, what they have done to the people of HK. They tell us to be proud of our country. They really believe that what they are doing is right, they think they need to do it.

What about the influence of the Communist Party?

See, if you follow the party, you can get everything. You can get a job. They told me during the interactions, you are qualified, you can be one of us and enjoy life

But I don't want that life. They told me, if you go against us, then you will lose everything. They told me, if you are middle class, then you will lose everything. But my conscience knows that this

is not right, and it will not allow me to do this. I did not choose the good life, by sacrificing my values. I want to live with dignity and with freedom of speech with diversity. I don't want to have only one way of life. It is dangerous for people to challenge this, and they have to pay a price. In the 'Me Too' movement, people came forward and they got power. That is real change and empowerment in which I believe and want to continue doing this.

What are your future plans and what do you think is the future of journalism?

In other professions you don't need to tell the truth. This is not their job and obligation to tell the truth, but it is my job if I remain in journalism. I am part of the minority now and people don't care about the truth, I hope that changes. Reality changes so fast. I don't know when I will go to jail again. I paid the price for just doing my job. If I can't publish in mainland China, I feel like I am writing a draft for history, 100s of years later it might be read, and people will read about the journalism of today's China. I often think that journalism will die out, but Chinese people are tough. I have some hope that journalism will survive. I will keep telling the truth, even if I have to take a break and try out another profession such as academics for a while.



Paolo Borrrometi

Italy

I refuse to be labelled as an ‘anti-mafia journalist’

In January 2015, Sicilian journalist Paolo Borrometi reluctantly travelled almost a thousand kilometres from the Italian countryside Modica to Italy’s capital city, Rome. The 38-year-old journalist had already been living under police protection for almost five months prior, since the mafia threatened to kill him. When Borrometi started reporting as a freelancer from the south-east triangle of Sicily, he hoped to find out more about the mafia nexus in his hometown. With a help of few colleagues, he set up an independent online newspaper in 2012. It focused on investigative stories. In a land where agricultural mafias have flourished in silence for decades, Borrometi and his colleagues’ project is quite worrying. Case in point : on April 6, 2014, two men snuck into his garden, brutally beat him up and left him on the ground to bleed. The warning was clear. One of them, in fact, whispered in a rather rough dialect: ‘Either you do your business, or this will be only the beginning’. A few weeks later, his flat was burnt. The harassment of local criminals confirms what seemed obvious: the mafia wanted to silence Borrometi. But doing his business, as suggested, was not an option. Today, Borrometi is the vice director of Italy’s second largest news agency, AGI, and director of the independent news website ‘La Spia’. His fight for information comes at a cost: his freedom. Over to Borrometi.

How would you describe your style of journalism?

I pursue investigative journalism. That's all. I refuse to be labelled as an „anti-mafia journalist“. To accept the term „anti-mafia journalist“ is to implicitly acknowledge that there are journalists who are not opposed to the mafia. Some court decisions have shown that such people exist, but I don't like that.

You started off in journalism as a freelancer in 2012. But very quickly, you created your own newspaper. What was the reason?

I was collaborating with newspapers that usually had no space to publish real investigative stories. With several colleagues, we founded an independent newspaper, entirely online, which is called 'La Spia' and still exists today. 'La Spia', in Italian, means „the spy“. That's what we were constantly told at the time – we were spies. Of course, this was not a good thing. We were finally able to devote ourselves to the investigation. To be completely free of all pressures, we refused all the financial support we were offered. Only the webmaster is paid. We had other collaborations on the side and our contribution to 'La Spia' was not paid for.

Why was this financial independence so important?

When we started our newspaper, we received calls from several potential sponsors. One of them was a big company privatising cemeteries in Sicily. They offered us financial support but on one condition: that we keep a friendly eye on them. When I heard this, my blood ran cold. My colleagues agreed: the only one sponsored would be our webmaster and the website expenses. For the rest, we let it go.

How was your newspaper received?

As soon as we refused to have sponsors, the problems started. As a director, I received threats, which became more and more serious. We were isolated and marginalised. At the same time, like

so many other news organisations, we faced a crisis in the news business. We have gone from 20 or so staff members to four or five today. It is always easier to remember those who are no longer with us than to support those, who are still alive and fighting every day for freedom of expression. Journalists should be the watchdogs of democracy, but all too often they have been its pet dogs.

You have done a lot of research on agricultural mafias. Why are they still often considered, wrongly, as less dangerous?

We often forget that mafias are born from the land. They have subsequently evolved and diversified, but the agricultural mafias are nothing more than them returning to their roots. Today, the object of covetousness is no longer the land but the products of the land. All the mafias have understood that it is useless to wage war against each other and that it is better to be united to share the spoils. To achieve this, there is a long chain of exploitation. In Vittoria, for example, the second largest fruit and vegetable market in southern Italy, in south-eastern Sicily, the mafia exploits a foreign workforce, men and women who come from other European or African countries. They are the ones who usually do the harvesting. Once the product is harvested, it is entrusted to another type of mafia entrepreneur: the one who takes care of the packaging and transport. Once the trucks are full of fruit and vegetables, they travel through Italy to the north and other European countries. This is where another mafia comes in: the one that loads weapons or drugs on board. On an average, a truck loads 30,000 kilos of agricultural products. It takes a whole night to load it. It's not difficult to hide five or 10 kilos of cocaine. Police checks are random because it is impossible to check all the trucks, otherwise the produce would never arrive fresh on the shelves. And when they do, it is often impossible to unload the entire contents of the truck. Finally, all these fruits and vegetables are grown in greenhouses. These greenhouses are made of plastic and this plastic is considered special waste because it is often impregnated with the pesticides used. Once a year, on average, they are changed. They have to be recycled, and this is where the mafia that runs the waste business

comes in. Behind the agricultural mafias, we find all the classic criminal activities. The opportunities are endless.

This phenomenon seems structured and yet it is still invisible in the public debate, why?

It is an obvious paradox. The mafia in the 1980s and 1990s in Sicily is associated with daily murders, with corpses found face down on the ground, lifeless. Yet even then, it was still said that the mafia did not exist. Today, when we talk about agricultural mafias, it's the same thing: we prefer to see it as a localised problem in the fruit and vegetable market in Vittoria, for example, without accepting that it's a deep-seated, structural problem. But we will never be able to deal with it properly if we behave like that. Even more so because, without knowing it, it's a problem that we bring to our tables every day. I'm not saying that we shouldn't eat fruit and vegetables anymore. But we should be aware of the supply chain. If we don't make this effort, it remains an invisible mafia.

Were you supported by your colleagues during this period?

Not much. That was one of the most painful things. They tried to discredit me at all costs. First it was said that the mafia had nothing to do with the threats I received. Then, when it was written in black and white by the judges, they said that I had not actually written anything that interesting. I always responded by saying, „Don't talk about me, talk about what I write, if it's wrong, let's discuss it!" Sometimes, it was due to collusion with the mafia, sometimes due to stupidity or malice. In any case, these three elements together are the perfect cocktail to isolate someone.

How do you manage to work under escort today?

We tend to think that real freedom is our physical freedom. We have seen with the successive confinements and restrictions due to the Covid-19 pandemic to what extent not being able to en-

joy this freedom costs us. I have learnt the hard way that the real freedom, even more precious, is the freedom to think and express oneself. I have 48 trials underway, four death sentences from three different clans. I am entering my eighth year of life under escort. Of course, it's hard. It's hard to live in fear, to not have a partner, to know that I won't have a family, to leave my homeland. It's a glass half empty. The glass half full is being able to do my job, my duty. There's nothing heroic about it; I'm just doing my job. I didn't abandon Sicily. I just had to leave it physically. I will defend this freedom until my last breath.

**the real freedom,
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Is journalism the only way to do this?


Passing on this fight to young people is fundamental. When you are 20 or 30, you don't think about death. In my case, I was confronted with statements about me that were transcribed following phone taps by mafia members. I was targeted by attacks. I had to face the reality that I could die. Of course, you can cross the road and have an accident. But in my case, I am exposed. Very early on, I felt the need to entrust and transmit to young people. I regularly go to meet them in schools. If they are not interested in the fight against the mafia, it is because it has not been properly explained to them. They are far from disinterested; they still dream. They must be made to understand that they are not only the future, but also the present and that their responsibilities start today.

By Cécile Debarge




Teodora Cvetkovska

Macedonia



Journalism is a way of life, not a profession



For 26-year-old Teodora Cvetkovska from Skopje, North Macedonia, journalism is here to drive the necessary changes in our societies, and there are no compromises when it comes to this mission. She started working as a medical worker and implemented what she learnt from medicine in journalism as well – helping the ones that are vulnerable and that need to have their stories told.

Now, working as a TV reporter during the last few years in North Macedonia, Cvetkovska also spent six months as an intern at the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty in Prague, Czech Republic, which she describes as an intense experience. Aside from journalism, Cvetkovska is also an activist, participating in a local initiative called “Retweet A Meal”, cooking meals and distributing them to the homeless across the country.

When and how did you start off in journalism media or activism? Did you have any particular goal in mind? Did you think that you would become this kind of journalist?

Journalism has always been my passion. I grew up reading newspapers and watching my favorite TV journalists investigate corruption, put politicians on the line of questioning and fight for freedom of speech. But, to be honest, due to the shifting political nature of North Macedonia, I didn't pursue my dream right away. I channeled my need to help people through my work in medicine, as a nurse in a centre for patients on dialysis. Even though far from journalism, I always wanted to know the stories of my patients and asked them questions frequently.

When the political regime in the country fell in 2017, I decided that now is the time to go ahead with my dream. I enrolled in journalism studies and was fortunate enough to start working in an online news syndication several months later.

Today, not only do I ask the questions, but I also have an audience to narrate the story to. In everything that I do, I try to remember what is most important. It's always about the person and the human story behind the person. It's these kinds of stories that move people and get engagement from the audience; stories that can change some part of the society we live in. Stories that have an impact.

I love helping people and I think this is my one true passion. It's just that now, I get to do that with keeping the public well informed, being a voice for the unheard and unseen in my society, and of course, battle the ongoing war against misinformation and disinformation.

Did you pursue any formal education before you began journalism or work as a media professional?

I did enroll in journalism studies in the fall of 2017, but after that one thing led to another. I began working in an online portal several months later as an intern. It was a huge eye opener for me.

On the one hand you get to see the higher education system with the theory and the books, and on the other, you get to see what it's like in the field working as a journalist.

It wasn't that hard to work and study, but what was hard is to see how old school the faculty was. We were taught from decades-old school books and learnt much about everything but nothing that's really useful for the field work you encounter as a journalist. That's why working alongside dedicated and respected journalists as well as informal education (trainings, workshops, seminars) was the key for me to learn the ropes of journalism.

It's always difficult to break something that have become a sort of tradition

How difficult has it been to break the mould and step out of the conventional margins? What advice would you give to others who are looking to take the plunge like you?

Ah... It's always difficult to break something that have become a sort of tradition in the business. People are indeed averted to changes and it takes time for it to move in the right direction. For me, that huge step forward was when I attended an exchange programme to visit the United States and to see how they work and teach journalism. I got to see several different universities, as well as several different national TV networks. I then realised that we were lacking far behind. It is something that I expected, but I didn't realise how far and wide that gap was.

The idea of uniting different characters behind a noble cause to help people is what drew me in even deeper.

Did some people or institutions inspire you? Do you have any role models? Who are they and how did their work inspire you?

My biggest inspiration is not directly related to my work. It's actually something that I do outside of work.

Several years ago, I joined a citizen movement called "Retweet A Meal". The idea behind it was simple. Instead of sharing photos of meals on social media, we would cook and share meals with people who were homeless or just didn't have the funds to buy food. The people I have met during my work there are indeed some of the most selfless humans in the country.

The idea of uniting different characters behind a noble cause to help people is what drew me in even deeper. They take time off their busy schedules, just to help others who are in need.

I know you may expect a different answer to this question, but these are the people that inspire me and these are the kinds of stories that I want to tell. Not only of the people who cook every week, but also of those in need. Most of the time, they have truly compelling stories that range from hard life stories to being victims of the country's system.

Can you tell us about some high points of your work? How important was this and how did it help you.

My high point was this year, when I received a recognition for my work called "Voice of the Invisible" for a story that I did on Vancho, a homeless person I met through "Retweet A Meal", whose

story was captivating and deeply moving. After we aired his story, Vancho was finally able to solve a medical problem he had for a decade.

This award meant a lot because it comes from an award committee that is made up of members who have been poor, homeless or belong to marginalised groups.

How do you measure the impact and reach of the work you do? Do you take social media seriously to measure impact? Have you figured out a way to measure impact?

As cliché as the audience's reactions may sound, I think they are the greatest measure of a journalist's work. When after publishing a story, I receive messages on social networks from people who have similar problems with the „system“. In that regard, I think that social networks are a great tool for us, information arrives faster, and the result and the impact is visible.

In the many years that you have been practising journalism or have been in the media, what has been the toughest moment? Can you elaborate or tell us about times when you felt you would give up?

In these difficult times for journalism in my country, but also in the world, I think I cannot single out any one situation or event. I think it is a constant struggle to look forward and fight for changes in the country and with the anomalies in our profession. On the other hand, those anomalies make me not want to give up.

Only if everyone enjoys the freedom to say what they think and give their views on the world can we say that we live in a mature society.

How did you come out of such a situation? Was help offered?

Yes. I helped myself. I realised that I should not give up being me. One of my mentors once told me, 'journalism is a way of life, not a profession'. When I realised this, I realised that only I can help myself out of all situations. It's that simple.

What is your motivation that keeps you going and continuing your work?

Doing stories that can make a change and have an impact in the society.

How do you generate revenues or manage finances? Is there a revenue model? Can you suggest some ways for revenue generation for independent journalists?

Given that I work as a TV reporter, my day is quite busy. However, I think that working by myself and learning mobile journalism will help me become a multimedia journalist. This is important because journalists these days know how

to edit, record, photograph themselves and can work much easier in freelance and increase their income.

How important is it for journalists and media persons to collaborate and cooperate with each other, to remain relevant and continue to expose wrongdoings and reflect what is really happening in our society?

Cooperation between colleagues is most important. Everyone is an individual, but journalism is a team effort. Only together can we act and contribute to change in the country.

What is the one key message that you want to give to other journalists/media persons who are trying similar things or students who are looking forward to joining the media?

Do not give up. We exist and we work to ask questions, write and fight for the citizens. Sometimes, it may seem hopeless. This profession is not among the highest paid ones, and we do not have as much rest and days off as we would like. But sleepless nights and pressures from both politicians and the public are forgotten when you manage to help someone.

There's a growing menace of fake news, hate speech and trolls that journalists/media persons have to face. Have you experienced being attacked and criticised for your work? If yes, how did you respond to this?

Fortunately, not. But there are many of my co-workers who were attacked during this period while doing their job professionally. A colleague, while reporting a protest was physically assaulted just because someone did not like the medium in which she works. Previously, colleagues were the target of party attacks from bot profiles on social networks. We are currently in the middle of negotiations to pass a law that would consider

an attack on a journalist as an attack on officials. I think that will improve the situation and that such attacks that I described above will not go unpunished.

How do you look at the rising intolerance and extremism of leaders and political parties against media, free speech and freedom of the press?

That was, is and will remain one of the biggest problems of democracy. A country that wants to silence the media is a country that is afraid of the truth and that everything can come to light from the journalistic pen.

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How important is the freedom of press and free speech for you? Do you think that such freedom is now eroding?

Freedom of speech is the most important thing for me. Both for my work and for me as a person. Only if everyone enjoys the freedom to say what they think and give their views on the world can we say that we live in a mature society. But it is a double-edged sword. That is why I think that journalists should know how to recognise and prevent freedom of speech from growing into

hate speech, which is a big problem these days. No, I do not think that freedom of speech is disappearing – I think that it has never completely existed even in the most perfect societies in the world.

How do you rate freedom of media and its role in your country? In comparison to others, what do you think is wrong or right with it?

The desire for investigative journalism and critical storytelling is low. It is good that we have a large number of media, which differ in the structure and model in which they work, and that young people have an interest in working as journalists. But it can also be a negative thing because the market is oversaturated because we are a small country.

We know it is in danger, but do you think the future of the free press is really bleak? Don't you see any silver lining, can you spot some light at the end of the tunnel?

No, the future is not so bleak at all. Yes, journalism has challenges to deal with. But with the right energy, I believe we will succeed. Freedom is not something that comes by itself, it should be worked for every day.

What does liberalism and democracy mean to you? How important is the role of the media to both of them?

I think that liberalism should be the driver and the main trump card of every journalist. However, in times of progressive thinking and the rise of authoritarian regimes in the heart of Europe, many media outlets have become corrupt and used as propaganda tools in the struggle for power. The media are the most important for informing the citizens, in order for them to be able to make an informed decision in the next democratic elections. There is no democracy without media that can offer it.

By Bojan Stojkovski



Katharina Finke

Germany

The pandemic really brings out the problems in journalism

Journalist and author Katharina Finke has reported from across the world, including India. She writes on subjects related to the environment, women, travel and life issues and has authored two books so far. Her book, 'With the Heart of a Tigress', about violence against women in India, is hugely popular in German and has been translated into Polish. Katharina says that despite massive political and social developments, countries such as India are underreported in Germany. The need for good quality journalism, according to her, becomes even more critical now. Katharina, who is now based in Berlin and preparing for the launch of her third book, says that while there has been an overload of information on Covid-19, people still don't trust the media.

Excerpts from the interview.

What was the one aspect that affected you the most during the pandemic? Was it the fact that you could not do your regular work like you used to do?

It was uncommon for me to be stuck up in one place because I am usually travelling across the world to report stories. But it was good in a way. I could use the time to work on my third book. I worked on it based in Berlin. I was lucky since I didn't have to cancel research trips. My last chapter of the book is also about lifestyles and balancing personal and professional life. So I used the reports about the pandemic for the book. I am used to writing from home and remotely. It is important for me to go out and observe things, but this exchange is not happening, which is important for the creative process. This is what I was missing and it's affecting my work.

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What was the biggest challenge you faced?

The biggest change has been that we can't interview people. I do a lot of reportage. We have to be with the people and be close to them, not only to conduct an interview online but to really understand the spirit and the tension of the story. This is what I always do, go deeper and try to understand people. But spending time with people in a close environment and this can't be done now, so this was a challenge.

Will journalism change after the pandemic?

It's still a question for me. I think it depends on how long the pandemic will continue. Even if it is for two years, people will miss these stories. But there will be no major change in journalism. But if it goes on for longer, then things will change. A sense of physical contact has changed. I'm quite optimistic that we have to live with it and there are other ways to do this. Some stuff can be done wearing a mask like TV interviews. Not everything is impossible. And this will improve. I don't think there will be a major change in journalism

How relevant will long form and feature journalism be?

It will always be relevant. But unfortunately, there is not much space for this kind of journalism. Depends on which country you are in. In Germany, foreign reporting is decreasing. Even for me, there are less and less opportunities to place my stories here. For instance, in South America, there are so many issues that can be reported but no one is interested. The responsibility of media is probably higher than ever before. The media is shaping opinion and creating awareness. Many say that there is too much reporting on Covid and issues like the refugee crisis are not being reported and I kind of agree with them.

What about reporting from and about India?

There is little reporting from India. There is so much reporting about (Donald) Trump, but not so much about (Narendra) Modi and what is happening in India. There is positive stuff such as Ayurveda and Yoga, but there are other issues that have to be reported and that are important.

What has been the impact of the pandemic. Hasn't it exposed the cracks in the media that existed before too?

The pandemic really brings out the problems in journalism. International journalism becomes more relevant now. Covid reporting has gone overboard, but other issues are slipping out

The responsibility of media is probably higher than ever before.

of the cracks. Take the weather for example, it's important but you can't just report the weather in the media all the time. So, it's time now that other issues are also reported and not just Covid alone.

Is there any positive impact on journalism?

For journalism, I don't really see anything positive. There are people who don't watch news. For them, this has strengthened their position even more and they think they don't need the media at all. There is a much bigger challenge for journalism. We are not handling it in the right way. There is a need to shift strategy. Collaborations are needed. This has always been important, and it will be. We need more collaborations in the real sense and not just by hiring fixers. It's important to engage local journalists and have actual knowledge sharing. It is essential internationally and even nationally. Only with collaboration can you get diversity in media. There must be collaboration at multiple levels. We can use technology to connect. Technology can support collaboration, but it can't replace face-to-face meetings.



Ewa Dunal

Ewa Dunal is a journalist and podcast producer at Sounds and Stories - podcast production initiative in Poland. She gained her first international journalistic experience working for Outriders - an international media start-up based in Poland as a researcher, she was also a reporter for Polish Public Radio and many other Polish media outlets. She took part in many international media programs like News Impact Academy organized by Google. She has a master's degree in economics and international business. She graduated from Poznań University of Business and Economics and Nottingham Trent University. She was part of the EPRIE program in 2019.



Chaitanya Marpakwar

Chaitanya Marpakwar is an award winning journalist with the Times of India newspaper based in Mumbai, India. He covers civics and politics. In his journalism career he has received several top awards for investigative journalism including the Ramnath Goenka and RedInk Awards. He graduated in journalism from Mumbai's St. Xavier's College and has a Masters in Politics from UK's Cardiff University. He was a recipient of the Asia Journalism Fellowship in Singapore and the Robert Bosch Stiftung's India-Germany Media Ambassadors Fellowship in Germany. He has won the British Council's Study UK Alumni's award too. He was part of the EPRIE programme in 2019.



Cécile Debarge

Cécile Debarge is an award-winning freelance journalist based in Palermo, Italy. She has worked as an anchor for the international French radio (RFI) and for the Paris office of the Japanese newspaper Asahi Shimbun. Since 2014 she has extensively covered migration and social issues across Europe, Africa and recently in Central America. She prefers long-form and long-term journalism style. She holds two Bachelor of Arts - in Literature and Journalism and in German studies, one Master of Arts in European studies and she graduated from the ESJ journalism school, in France. She was part of the EPRIE programme in 2019.



Bojan Stojkovski

Bojan Stojkovski has been working as a professional journalist covering foreign policy and technology for more than a decade. Currently based in Skopje, North Macedonia, he reported from London, Seoul, Tokyo, Washington DC, Brussels, Berlin and Moscow. As a freelance journalist, he has covered environmental and human rights issues, as well as science and tech-related topics in the Balkan region, Central and Eastern Europe. His work has been featured in Foreign Policy, ZDNet, Haaretz, Balkan Insight and the Wall Street Journal (WSJ). He was part of the EPRIE programme in 2018.

In cooperation with

ABOUT EPRIE

The Exchange Program for Regional Integration in East Asia and Europe (EPRIE) is a 10 to 12 day program held annually in Europe and East Asia alternately, with intensive workshops and vivid exchanges of views including political talks, visits to institutions and guided tours. EPRIE aims to promote and improve dialogue between people of neighboring states, whose relations have been troubled in the past; to develop personal contacts; to build a long lasting network; to stimulate and foster the development of further cooperation. EPRIE was founded in 2012 by the two organizers Han Nataly Jung-Hwa and Rita Zobel. It is mainly supported by Robert Bosch Stiftung and the Japan office of Friedrich-Ebert Foundation.

ABOUT ROBERT BOSCH STIFTUNG

The Robert Bosch Stiftung GmbH is one of the major German foundations associated with a private company in Europe. It works in the areas of health, education, and global issues. With its charitable activities, it contributes to the development of viable solutions to social challenges. For this purpose, the Foundation implements its own projects, enters into alliances with partners, and supports third-party initiatives.

ABOUT KOREA VERBAND

The Korea Verband is a politically independent forum providing information and promoting cooperation among people who are interested in the history, culture, and politics of Korea. This platform will appeal to all individuals who wish to engage with or find out about current developments on the Korean peninsula. The Korea Verband seeks and promotes collaboration on national and international levels with other non-governmental organizations and initiatives as well as experts on Korea in the areas of science, journalism, politics, labor unions, churches, environment, women's rights, arts and culture. The Korea Verband was founded in 1990 and is a founding member of the foundation Stiftung Asienhaus. Since 2008 the Korea Verband has been based in Berlin.