2022

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MEDIAHUIS

Journalistic
annual report 2022

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Press security and press freedom are inextricably linked

The core of independent journalism: journalists who don't allow themselves to be intimidated and are determined to report without censorship.

There are certain moments in your life that you never forget. Moments where you recall exactly where you were and how you felt when you got the message. I remember the attack on *De Telegraaf* in 2018 like it was yesterday. It was the first time in my career that I'd experienced an attack on the media up close. We'd seen what happened to *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris and *Jyllands Posten* in Copenhagen. It made an impression, but it happened far away. This time it was close to home, and it involved our own people. But what made an even deeper impression on me than the sense of danger was the reaction by De Telegraaf. The following day, the splash read: We'll never be silenced! For me, that's at the core of what our journalism stands for. It shows how journalists don't allow themselves to be intimidated and are determined to report without censorship.

In recent years, safety has become even more important to our company. We've stepped up security in all our buildings. Some of our colleagues are under permanent protection. And while this has become a new reality, you never really get used to it. It remains unreal that journalist Willem Groeneveld had Molotov cocktails put through the letterbox of his home one summer night in 2021, or that our Irish colleagues have been informed by the police about death threats.

The threat to our journalism continues unabated and has spread over the years to online platforms. Where abusers are anonymous, hiding behind their screens, and where, at times it seems that all respect and humanity have disappeared. Because online, too, our journalists are suffering and the feeling of threat is growing. It's our responsibility as a group

> **Free press can only thrive in a safe environment**

to take this seriously and support our people. In the contributions from our editors-in-chief in this report, you can read how we deal with this in our newsrooms. Because it is in no way acceptable for our people and thus our journalism to come under such pressure.

Press security and press freedom are inextricably linked. After all, a free press can only thrive in a safe environment. And a free press is crucial for a healthy democracy and a functioning society. But it's clear that this cannot be taken for granted. That's why I'm glad we're shining the spotlight on this issue with the Journalistic Annual Report. The three essays on press freedom, press safety and trust address various topical issues and perspectives. These reflect once again why we all do it every day: ensuring a sustainable future for our independent journalism.

I wish you an enjoyable read.

Gert Ysebaert
CEO Mediahuis groep

Emilie van Outeren has been a correspondent for *NRC* in Central Europe and the Balkans since 2019. She writes about the rule of law, human rights, media, social developments and the war in Ukraine.

Eradication of press freedom in six steps

A sticker with 'LGBT-free zone' on it, distributed in the conservative weekly paper *Gazeta Polska*. **Photo AFP**

Those in power in Central Europe know very well how to frustrate the media. Using money, legal intimidation or even spying. Self-censorship has become all too normal.

As a journalist in the Netherlands, press freedom is like clean drinking water: it's just there. Yes, you do know that independence and security can't be taken for granted. Occasionally, reporters are physically attacked at protests or digitally trampled by an army of trolls. Sometimes an angry source starts a lawsuit or the government decides to make access to information a little more difficult. But the clean water continues to flow from the tap.

Before moving to Poland in 2019 to become a correspondent for NRC in Central Europe, I assumed that things would be pretty much the same by now in the post-Communist democracies. In Russia, China, Iran and many other places, there can be no independent media due to censorship, persecution and even mortal danger. But the countries I was going to write about had escaped from such dictatorship 20 years earlier and are now largely members of the European Union.

Except for the vague notion of a lack of pluralistic press in Hungary and Bulgaria, I left with naive optimism about press freedom in the region.

Not only did I have no clue then, but the already dire situation has since become worse in Poland, Hungary and several Balkan countries. Journalists may not be imprisoned and newspapers are not banned, nor do autocratic regimes censor directly. Instead, the media are thwarted in much more subtle and creative ways. To restrict information, stifle public debate and propagate the incumbent's agenda. But also to create imaginary enemies and polarise a society.

How does a democracy eradicate press freedom in six steps?

The public highway

Other than in the Czech Republic, public broadcasters and news agencies in Central Europe have never really broken away from the state. Broadcast controllers are politically appointed, talk shows are presented by politicians and news is in the service of the ruling power. This colours newsreels and current affairs programmes under liberal, left-wing, pro-European rule, but takes absurd forms under conservative-nationalist governments. Not a week goes by without Polish state broadcaster TVP portraying opposition leader Donald Tusk as a Nazi.

Tax money is also used to hurt private media. In Central Europe, the state takes a substantial share of advertising space. When the Polish government took office in 2015,

it stopped all advertising in media it considered hostile. Ministries, institutions and state-owned companies cancelled all subscriptions to such newspapers. Instead, Catholic radio stations and propaganda magazines were showered with subsidies.

In 2021, the regime went a big step further in what it calls the "repolonisation" of the media: a conglomerate of almost all local magazines was acquired by the state oil company from a German owner. A local editor I spoke to feared that the ruling PiS party was "using public money to take over the private media to indoctrinate society even more, to make it easier to win the next local and parliamentary elections". Soon after that, he and his reporters were out of a job.

The oligarch route

Whereas in Poland, with a population of 40 million and strong journalistic traditions, the curbing of the free press has happened in fits and starts, in Hungary it has been astonishingly fast.

Since Viktor Orbán came to power for the second time in 2010, he has allowed commercial media outlets to take charge. Newspapers, magazines, news sites, radio and television stations were in financial trouble after the economic crisis. Others found themselves in difficulties when not only the state but also companies that wanted to do business with it pulled their advertising. Struggling media were then "rescued" by Orbán-affiliated oligarchs and purged of any critical voices. Thus arose, I learnt from the editor-in-chief of the independent magazine HVG, "a monopoly on information by a small, corrupt elite that controls elections through the media and gives itself access to public money". There are no longer any checks on power, as formerly independent media are forcibly turned into mouthpieces of power.

Omerta

A journalist is only as good as their sources, and many of those in Central European countries have gone silent. There are still leaks from powerful circles, but simple things like reporting on a school or hospital are no longer possible in Hungary. The idea of a fair hearing has become impossible. "Journalistically, our biggest obstacle is the lack of information. We never get answers to questions from the government, and other sources are afraid to talk to us," says the Hungarian editor.

Pluralis helps safeguard independent journalism

Pluralis brings together a group of European media companies, foundations and impact investors and is a joint initiative of the New York-based Media Development Investment Fund, the King Baudouin Foundation (Belgium), Tinius Trust (Norway) and Mediahuis. Pluralis' investments are designed to protect independent news companies from takeovers that could compromise their editorial independence, ensuring that European citizens continue to have access to a plurality of news sources. Pluralis today holds a 34% stake in Petit Press, Slovakia's second-largest publisher, and 40% in leading Polish media company Gremi Media, publisher of Rzeczpospolita, one of the most important newspapers in Poland.

The legal path

Media laws are rewritten to restrict and make life difficult for publications. Court action for alleged libel and slander has increased exponentially. It's so bad that this attempted silencing of journalists has been given a name: strategic lawsuits against public participation, or SLAPPs. Sometimes brought by the state or a politician, but more often by institutions and individuals loyal to the government. In Croatia, the public broadcaster has brought cases against other media outlets. I spoke to Primoz Cirman, a freelance investigative journalist from Slovenia, who was facing 13 claims against him from one government-affiliated businessman at the time.

Nearly 100 such cases were pending against Polish opposition newspaper Gazeta Wyborza by the end of 2022. Even in front of the hijacked judiciary in Poland, the newspaper almost always wins, but at great cost – including for the taxpayer. The newspaper and its individual journalists are wasting a lot of money, time and energy that can't be spent on quality journalism. And it's about intimidation: these cases are designed to make journalists think twice the next time they're faced with a controversial topic.

Espionage

As if it weren't enough to clamp down on media companies, individual journalists are also being targeted. By persecuting them or branding them as enemies of the state, but also by bugging them. In 2021 the Hungarian investigative journalist Szabolcs Panyi revealed how every time he asked the government for a response, his phone was hacked with the Israeli surveillance software Pegasus. They read his emails and apps and were able to control his microphone and camera without his knowledge. "The only thing that stood out – in retrospect – is that several sources suddenly didn't want to talk to me anymore. As if they'd been tipped off that it was now extra dangerous," says Panyi. The intimidation was not only directed at him but was also meant to deter sources.

> **Complaints of libel or slander are deliberately used to obstruct journalists in their work**

Auto-mutilation: self-censorship and activism

The sad thing is that previously independent media and journalists have themselves become worse off due to this enormous pressure. Some get caught up in the new editorial direction of a transformed paper or radio station and censor themselves. Not everyone can or will oppose it on principle.

Others – they are only human – react strongly to government interference and hostility and do the things they are accused of: they wage fierce opposition against those in power. Without sources and with less funding, it's easier to fill pages with opinions than with investigation. Journalism becomes activism. It's a grim impoverishment and politicisation that does no favours to citizens.

MEDIAHUIS NEDERLAND

‘I won’t be silenced. Never’

An incident with a notebook led to a wrongful accusation against a journalist. A form of legal harassment.

Corine de Vries
Editor-in-chief Mediahuis Nederland
Regionale Dagbladen

A menswear shop in a small North Holland village along the coast went bankrupt. Our reporter passed it four weeks later and saw that the shop was suddenly open again, only now with home accessories in the window. Interesting, because no relaunch had been reported and the owner had large debts.

A good local reporter naturally goes to investigate. “Let’s not have this conversation over the phone,” said the partner of the owner, inviting him to go and visit. Once there, he’s offered a coffee, takes out his pen and notepad and asks his questions. The owner joins them, explaining how much the bankruptcy has affected him and how he isn’t ready for publicity yet. Suddenly, he jumps up, snatches the notebook from the journalist’s hands. He turns around and starts tearing the pages, ignoring requests to give it back. Our reporter wants his notebook, which includes notes from previous interviews. He grabs the owner by the shoulder and snatches it back.

The partner apologises and reiterates this a few days later when our boss gets in touch to discuss the incident. We decide to let the matter rest.

Two weeks later, the reporter gets a call from the police. He has to come in for questioning. Assault charges have been filed, “because you obviously dealt blows”. What follows are sleepless nights, discussions with a lawyer and a report to PersVeilig – this appears to be a new level of harassment.

And so an experienced reporter, with 40 years in regional journalism behind him, is made to feel anxious and insecure. However much we support and reassure him. According to the lawyer, the charge is definitely going to be dropped as there is a witness who fully supports his story. But subsequent to the interrogation, fingerprints and mugshots are taken. Our reporter feels humiliated and violated.

It’s a new low in the ways journalists are physically and legally obstructed and threatened. A major threat to press freedom. Fortunately, our reporter is determined to keep taking out his pen and notepad. “I won’t be silenced. Never.”

Aachener Zeitung

Football club only wants to hear from cheerleaders

The directors and funders of Alemannia Aachen want to ban critical journalists from the stadium. Because they report the facts.

Thomas Thelen
Editor-in-chief Aachener Zeitung

Alemannia Aachen is a football club with a lot of tradition and a proud history. The most important club in the Aachen region, they played in the Bundesliga from 1967 to 1970 and in the 2006/07 season. In 2004 they even qualified for the Uefa Cup. With its Tivoli stadium, the club has a modern arena that can hold nearly 33,000 people. The team has since fallen down the sporting ladder and ended up at the bottom of Germany’s fourth division. And yet it is still a big topic for Medienhaus Aachen, a topic we follow closely with our usual critical journalistic eye.

But not everyone at Tivoli appreciates that critical oversight, especially now the team is finally playing successfully again and is currently sitting third in the table. When we reported in November that controls over fan access to the stadium were too lax, the chair of the supervisory board was not happy. We were accused of wanting to spoil the positive atmosphere that was finally being felt around the Tivoli after a long time.

It is a fact that the police have come down hard on those responsible for inadequate control at the entrance to the stadium. The consequence: fans using pyrotechnics without permission, throwing a cup at an assistant referee’s head, unauthorised entry on to the pitch and forcing a match to be abandoned. The regional football association has fined the club several times and said that it lacked “proper awareness of the problem”.

And those in charge at Alemannia? They chose media criticism instead of self-criticism. The chair of the board spoke publicly of “dubious rubbish” in relation to our reporting and publicly denounced our reporters by name. An influential club donor demanded the removal of our colleague on social media. According to him, Alemannia should make use of its rights to exclude representatives of Medienhaus Aachen from the stadium.

What about us? We will continue to do our job and report on Alemannia Aachen, despite the resistance of some officials at the club. Freedom of the press and of opinion are essential elements of a democracy.

Belfast Telegraph

Every journalist is on his guard here

In Northern Ireland, threats against journalists are commonplace. Sometimes investigative stories even have to be published without bylines.

Eoin Brannigan
Editor-in-chief Belfast Telegraph

When I worked in Dublin, I could remember exactly where I was when I got news of a single threat to one of my reporters. Here in Belfast I have lost count of such calls. Threats to journalists have become part of the publishing landscape in Northern Ireland and despite all the condemnation, and some attempts by the police to improve their own response, there is little indication that those responsible will be brought to justice.

It is an obvious point to make but when it comes to press freedom death threats are a fundamental barrier. We have real experience of journalists losing their lives in Northern Ireland, the *Sunday World*’s Martin O’Hagan among them. Almost four years ago Lyra McKee was shot dead at a riot in Derry. So these are not idle threats, there are people walking the streets of Northern Ireland prepared to act on them.

There are different levels of threat, and there is a suspicion that some of them are called in out of little more than spite, but nobody wants to be the editor who decides to write off any warning as baseless. They all must be taken seriously, which is a complicating factor to the job in Northern Ireland.

Other more sophisticated avenues are also employed to bully the press into inaction. Thankfully we have had more success in combating these attempts to silence us recently. This year the Sunday Life successfully challenged an injunction attempt from the alleged leader of the East Belfast UVF, Stephen Matthews, who tried to use the courts to prevent us naming him as the head of one of Northern Ireland’s biggest drugs gangs. Matthews, reportedly a millionaire, was surprisingly granted legal aid for his case.

The consequences of losing the case would have been serious, as it would have opened the way for paramilitaries and criminals of all backgrounds, often with legal aid and at no cost to themselves, to seek to gag us whenever they saw fit. But, with a lot of help from our legal team, we earned a significant victory in the battle for press freedom.

It was not our only victory either. In November the Sunday Life team won the Investigation Of The Year (Regional) award at the inaugural UK Media Freedom Awards, for its revelations about the South East Antrim UDA, one of Northern Ireland’s biggest crime gangs. Several threats against journalists have been traced back to this gang and any reports are published by the Sunday Life Investigations Team rather than under individual, identifiable bylines. Those who put the work into winning the award had to think twice about accepting it in public. Even moments of celebration are clouded by the difficult environment facing our journalists.

Long live the sin bin

Journalists can easily be sucked into the communication strategy of companies, sports clubs and politicians. In doing so, they limit their own freedom.

Liesbeth Van Impe
Editor-in-chief Nieuwsblad

Anyone who talks about press freedom usually addresses the Great Principles. The foundation of democracy, the most fundamental of fundamental rights, the alpha and omega of a democratic organisation of society... You only have to look around the world to see that press freedom is still hard-won, in both mature dictatorships and faltering democracies.

That press freedom is one that Western European newspapers write about, but rarely have to defend themselves. What a luxury. But it's also a risk: those who only consider the Great Principles sometimes misjudge the much more subtle ways in which press freedom is chipped away at here.

What do you do about the football club that keeps the doors firmly shut and only offers a player for comment when it suits them – provided, of course, that you only ask the right questions and nothing is said about it? What about the celebrity who sees a newspaper as a platform to sell something, with managers who think an interview is something you can rewrite at will? Or the politician who will only talk on their own terms?

Particularly after the pandemic, we have to fight to retain the right to free news gathering. But too many PRs have since become accustomed to the fact that communication can be streamlined to an extreme degree. Those who refuse to go along with their long list of conditions end up in the sin bin. In the heyday of "access journalism", this is the ultimate nightmare for many journalists.

It doesn't have to be that way. Sometimes you have to embrace the sin bin. The perspective from there is often more interesting than if you obediently dance to their tune – even if you miss out on a "scoop" as a result. It's exactly this freedom that our journalists and newsrooms have to defend every day.

LEEUWARDER COURANT

Everybody wants press freedom – until it doesn't suit them

Farmers protested this year to be heard. But journalists could no longer go out alone.

Sander Warmerdam
Editor-in-chief Leeuwarder Courant

Freedom of the press is the foundation of our democracy. Everyone seems to agree on that – when it suits them. Ministers choose to restrict the media when it comes to sensitive issues. Police prefer not to comment – unless they need our help. Ordinary people love to read about others, but no longer dare to have their own names in the paper, for fear of reactions on social media.

The mayor and councillors of Leeuwarden declared at an introductory meeting that nothing should be put in the way of the media. But when asked why their press office didn't answer our questions, they remained silent. Press freedom has become an occasional argument.

Nor were the farmers who shut down our province last summer interested in facts, fair hearings or independent sources. The journalist asked questions, while the protesters mostly sought confirmation of their own story. Press freedom and press safety are an extension of each other. At the height of the protests, we didn't feel it was responsible to send reporters out alone. They had to work in pairs, so they could keep an eye on each other. The farmers, contractors and supporters couldn't care less about press freedom.

So it's important to keep looking at the balance between press and freedom, including for our colleagues. Two ideas for starters for editors and publishers:

Press freedom: Allowing journalists more time to think, detached from the relentless rhythm of the press.

Push freedom: The sense of calm when your phone is switched off for a while. Precious moments with parents, children a movie or great food, where you're not disturbed by a vibrating phone.

It's more than just creative language play. Everything that happens affects our reporters. Under pressure from data, social media and the outside world, we're asking more and more of them. They are constantly on. And the press can only be free when our people feel safe and free.

GAZET VAN ANTWERPEN

A politician may not abuse the law just because he doesn't like an opinion

A Vlaams Belang politician uses legal action as a strategy against Gazet van Antwerpen.

Frederik De Swaef
Editor-in-chief Gazet van Antwerpen

Since the 2019 elections, Vlaams Belang has been polling almost constantly as Flanders' largest party. The far-right party gained its first parliamentary seat in Antwerp in 1981 and until today the area provides the party leadership. That's currently Tom Van Grieken from Schoten. I got to know the man better this year because he started demanding right of reply on editorials from *Gazet Van Antwerpen*.

It concerned a Standpunt column by political journalist Dirk Hendrikx, in which he describes how Vlaams Belang, on the one hand, tries to be worthy of government and, on the other, takes inspiration from the Hungarian leader Viktor Orbán. In another Standpunt, city reporter Patrick Van De Perre talked about an event in the Handelsbeurs in Antwerp, a gathering organised by Vlaams Belang of far-right parties from across Europe, where some controversial figures spoke. Van De Perre argued that a party that engages with people like that cannot be a candidate for government.

Van Grieken requested a right of reply each time, not because the reports were factually wrong, but because he believes that Vlaams Belang were unfairly portrayed in a bad light and that the party is "unfairly and inaccurately portrayed" in the Flemish press.

Gazet van Antwerpen respects the law and is always willing to correct mistakes, but reserves the right to express an opinion about a politician or a party in the newspaper and on the website without being reprimanded for doing so and without having to publish detailed rebuttals.

On asking Van Grieken what the intention is, it emerwged that these legal actions are a deliberate strategy. What will that mean if Vlaams Belang becomes the largest party at the next election? Or on the day they come to co-govern?

Steven De Bock was still a student when he took his first steps into journalism with *Het Volk* in the 1990's. Until recently, he was head of news at *Nieuwsblad*, but since September he's back doing what he enjoys most: writing articles.

Memorial card tells the story of hasty error

An aggressive protester during a demonstration against Covid safety measures on 23 January 2022 in Brussels, Belgium. **Photo Kristof Vadino**

The climate for journalists has become bleak. But that doesn't change our duty to continue building credibility and trust. Just give us the time to do so.

His memorial card sat on my desk for years. Patrice Braut. An unknown man from Brussels who suddenly became known, being the only Belgian victim of 9/11. It was there because for me, Patrice Braut also represented something very different: a crucial lesson in journalism to beware the rush job.

I'd created a portrait of him. I'd rushed to visit his parents, and against a tight deadline I'd written the story up afterwards. Then I went home, with a slight gnawing feeling in my stomach. The next day it became clear why: I'd given Patrice the wrong first name.

You could say it was a detail. No one pulled me up on it. Maybe no one even saw it. But for me, it was a source of great shame. And it was a lesson. One I wanted to remember, by always keeping the card next to my keyboard.

We're many years down the road, now. The card has disappeared in some move or other, a sad consequence of the clean desk policy. And, honestly, I have to confess that when writing this piece I even had to check for a moment what Patrice Braut's name was. But I've never forgotten the lesson itself. And when I'm tempted to go too fast again, it helps me to dial things back a bit. Because some 20 years on, that lesson is perhaps more relevant than ever. Digitisation has made everything so much faster, and that creates the risk of so many mistakes. The chances of journalists or news outlets being punished for a mistake are greater than ever, too. Before you have a chance to correct it, a stupid mistake can cause a storm on Twitter. Carelessness caused by haste is enough to give extra fuel to that now familiar rant: "You can't trust them, the mainstream media."

These are tough times for journalists. The online world is

> **There's an anger in society that's also directed against us journalists**

busier than ever. New players, new forms of communication. We have to contend with an endless stream of fake news flooding the world via social media. And with those same Twitters and Telegrams, extreme voices have found a forum where they can attack our credibility. An army of mini Donald Trumps. Toxic, nasty, exhausting. And they find fertile ground. After all, there's an anger in society that's also directed against us. It leads to verbal hostility, which occasionally even becomes physical.

The Netherlands is discussing ways to protect journalists and journalism. Talks between editors, unions and the government are also happening in Flanders. There is real cause for concern. Journalists reporting on cocaine gangs fear they could be targeted personally. And those fears are justified. Journalists who report on violent demonstrations seem to get a share of the blows – from rioters and forces of law and order – more often than before. And there's that looming, unpleasant feeling that you could quite unexpectedly find yourself at the centre of a Twitter storm, when values such as respect and privacy suddenly fly out of the window.

And on top of all these problems, there's also that "angry citizen", who "doesn't believe anything the mainstream media says" and who reacts with sometimes surprisingly vehement hostility. The question is how we convince them of our credibility and good intentions. And more than ever, I think the answer is: by persevering.

Of course, we have to constantly question ourselves. Of course, there is always room for improvement. But at the same time, I look with pride at how we in the newsroom do our jobs. I see colleagues who gave their all during the pandemic. Who in record time became experts in the subject, doing their utmost to answer all the questions that were flying around. Quickly, clearly, accurately. I see colleagues diving deep into political issues to uncover what's really going on. And I see colleagues trying to translate complex, technical stories into clear language. By getting out on the street and seeking out the people involved. The nitrogen debate is also a story of human tragedies among farmers. The pandemic is also about elderly people who died alone. The crèche scandal is about worried parents, but also about well-meaning crèche operators in danger of going bankrupt. And the asylum crisis, that's also about Latib in his tent on the bridge and about Katrine bringing him hot soup.

Ask me what Nieuwsblad stands for, and there is your answer. It's that combination. Ask me what reliable journalism stands for and the answer remains the same. For clear answers to the questions people are asking. For clear insights, especially when the situation is murky. And above all, it's about listening

> **"I was rushing and got a victim's name wrong. His memorial card reminds me**

Beatrice de Lavalette lost her legs in the Brussels terrorist attacks. She is now a Paralympic athlete. **Photo Guy Puttemans**

to those in danger of being forgotten. It's those people whose door we need to knock on and tell them, "I'm here, tell me, I have time."

Just how important that is is something I experienced myself recently, in the trial of the Brussels terrorist attack. Those attacks at the airport and Maelbeek metro station have become almost abstract for many people. We say they were "awful" and "horrible" and "terrible", but we feel very little about them any more. Until you're sitting at the table with a woman who saw it happen before her eyes, and you see her shrink as she recounts it again. And then in addition to the pain, you understand the anger and disappointment. Because since the attack, she has been caught up not only in her trauma but also in an administrative merry-go-round.

So, let us examine whether we can and should better protect journalists from real dangers. But at the same time, let us continue to work on our own credibility. By taking the time to get to the bottom of even difficult issues and inform our readers accurately. By investing time in the story of the people affected. By keeping sufficient contact with real world. The world of those angry people, yes, but also the world of the others, who may shout much less on Twitter but are just as relevant. People doing their best to make society a little nicer. People trying to turn their anger into something positive. Or people who need help but don't know where to look for it.

All this takes time. Time that appears to be in short supply in the hectic news cycle we now live in. Because the deadline too often seems to be "now". Whereas time – time spent productively – can be a powerful weapon in the battle we face for our credibility. I should look for that memorial card again. The desk doesn't have to be so clean.

SUNDAY WORLD

‘The use of firearms cannot be ruled out’

Journalists are increasingly the target of orchestrated online campaigns. And reach beyond the digital world.

Brian Farrell
Editor-in-chief Sunday World

“Police are in receipt of information that criminal elements have been monitoring the movements of Steven Moore with a view to some form of violent attack. This may be related to Mr. Moore’s reporting in the press. The use of firearms cannot be ruled out.” - The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI).

This is the chilling warning given to *Sunday World* journalist Steven Moore on 9 June 2022.

Two police officers called to the door of his home, where he lives with his wife and young family, to alert him to a “credible threat” from a loyalist paramilitary drugs gang.

The threat was shocking, but the subsequent social media campaign – orchestrated by criminal elements – was equally concerning.

Their Facebook and Twitter posts suggested that certain sections of the media “had been falsifying threats against themselves” and were not to be taken seriously.

The tone and manner of the campaign sought to discredit the important, investigative work undertaken by many of our journalists – and turn right-thinking members of the community against the “mainstream media”.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, we have seen a sharp rise in orchestrated online attacks against the media – most notably by those seeking to spread disinformation on topics relating to health, government, and justice.

This faceless mob has moved from one controversy to the next – where once their cause was anti-vax, it has now become an anti-immigration message, leading to many of our writers becoming a lightning rod for their ire.

Mediahuis Ireland has played a significant role in highlighting the constant threats to our journalists and has sought to form a partnership with law enforcement and government on both sides of the Irish border to protect the freedom of speech and the integrity of our work.

While the proposed programmes are in their infancy, the aim is clear – threats to journalists via social media or other methods must not and will not be tolerated.

The Fourth Estate is even more vital now than it has ever been, and we must be protected.

HET BELANG VAN LIMBURG

‘We know where you live’

Local journalists know all about threats. The protagonists of their stories know how to find them. And death threats have become common.

Indra Dewitte
Editor-in-chief Het Belang van Limburg

Donald Trump’s misdeeds, the Covid pandemic, the war in Ukraine… If major world events in recent years have taught us one thing, it’s the importance of our press freedom. And there’s no press freedom without press safety, on that everyone agrees. It’s a hot topic everywhere. For journalists, but equally for media companies, publishers, TV stations and, of course, politicians.

But there’s some friction here. Press safety is usually only talked about in the narrow context of the dangers faced by war correspondents. And that completely ignores the reality of journalism in general, and regional journalism in particular. While only a small percentage of our people actually go to the frontline, many of them find themselves in a threatening situation every day, in their own backyard. And that makes sense. It’s not rocket science that the closer you are to your subject, the more vulnerable you make yourself. After all, the bad guys know where you live.

For example, Roel, one of our reporters at HBVLOnderzoekt, carried out a serious investigation into the illegal dog trade. Make no mistake: the kind of money involved here rivals that of the drug lords. That explains why, a few days after publication, he was not only sued for €650,000 but also received several death threats to his family over the phone. A day later, he was physically threatened. When he went to the bakery one Saturday morning, a Hells Angel with two American Staffies was waiting for him. He was to drop the investigation, the aggressor told him.

Or how about the experience of Mark, Thomas and Hanne, who revealed the scandal surrounding a Limburg mayor guilty of queue-jumping during the pandemic. They were blatantly pressurised for several weeks by the mayor’s entourage. And no, that wasn’t a pleasant experience. They were dragged through the mud on social media, they received threatening phone calls and their friends were targeted too. Fortunately, our journalists are experienced battlers, who aren’t easily deterred. But it gets into your head, especially when your family is dragged into that culture of fear.

So, a plea to broaden our view of press safety is really needed. The true hero is the journalist on the street, looking around their community and seeing what stories need to be told, regardless of the threat. And yes: the dog traders backed off, albeit briefly. The mayor was shown the door. And Roel, Thomas, Mark and Hanne? They’re still out on the streets of their patch, doing their jobs.

DAGBLAD VAN HET NOORDEN

‘We don’t talk to rats’

Secured houses, deflated tyres and intimidation by interviewees – sadly, that’s no longer news.

Evert van Dijk
Editor-in-chief Dagblad van het Noorden

What can I say about press freedom that Willem Groeneveld hasn’t already said? The face of the city blog Sikkom has shared his impressive victim impact statement elsewhere in this annual report. Not only was he frequently threatened, not only was he the victim of doxing, he and his girlfriend suffered a serious attack in their own home. It’s really only down to luck that they survived to tell their story.

I have nothing to add to his statement. Instead, I could talk about a journalist at *Dagblad van het Noorden* whose house has had to be secured, just like Willem’s. But we won’t talk about security, not here. What about Eelco Kuiken, a reporter in Staphorst who knows the place and the people like the back of his hand. Things got out of hand at a farmers’ protest in late November. He wanted to ask questions, but the protesters reacted aggressively. “We don’t talk to rats,” they told him. When he later went to leave, he found three of his car’s four tyres were flat. He wasn’t impressed. The tyres may have been flat, but they weren’t empty, and he didn’t feel physically threatened.

One of his colleagues, Carleen de Jong, was more affected after visiting a fishmonger in Lauwersoog. She wanted to follow up on the news that he was quitting his business after more than 30 years. The report hadn’t gone down well with him and he had reacted furiously over the phone. So she went to speak to him.

He didn’t like that either. He refused to let her publish anything and told her at length all that was wrong with Dagblad van het Noorden. Carleen thought that was a good time to leave. She grabbed her phone, which the man mistakenly interpreted as proof she’d recorded the conversation. Pushing and shoving followed, and he took photos of her. It led to a complaint about an “unwelcome journalist” and a report to the police. We filed our own report with the PersVeilig safety initiative, and as editor-in-chief I expressed my disapproval to the fishmonger. I don’t get the impression that we’re making much headway with press freedom, frankly. It’s a work in progress, including in the Northern Netherlands.

De Telegraaf

The tone is getting grimmer

Journalists are being abused and attacked, online and in the street, verbally and physically. The low point remains the threat from organised crime.

Paul Janssen
Editor-in-chief De Telegraaf

Journalists at *De Telegraaf* are taking a battering from the outside world. This was true when I started at the newspaper back in the 1990s; invariably, the war would be brought up. And it still is. Yet the battle that reporters have to face these days is of a different magnitude.

Take court reporter Saskia Belleman, who has had insults hurled at her across social media. “Media whore” and “Nazi bitch” to quote just a couple. Saskia says she has stopped keeping track of them. “It was too much.” She doesn’t want to report it.

Sports reporter Valentijn Driessen experiences similar. When he goes to stadiums to do his job, he often gets abuse: at the Arena he’s called “cockroach” and outside Amsterdam it’s “cancer Jew”. “Fortunately, I’m not on Twitter,” he says.

Abuse of journalists doesn’t happen only online. On the streets, too, the atmosphere has become grimmer. We saw this with the protests during the pandemic, and with the protests against statues of historical figures because they’re considered to glorify exploitation. Our reporters have been hit several times and are regularly harassed. As well as guidance, as a newspaper we also provide aftercare.

The climate in which journalists are targeted is partly fuelled by certain politicians. Unfortunately, some journalists also stoke the fire themselves with mutual insults and accusations. A Telegraaf reporter was dismissed in *NRC* as extreme and radically right-wing. I find that dangerous.

The low point remains the serious threat from organised crime, which prevents two Telegraaf reporters from going out without heavy police security. This, along with the 2018 attack on this newspaper, constitutes a serious threat to the free press. I am not a big believer in pompous phrases like journalism being “the watchdog of democracy”. But in recent years we seem to have been outlawed. It is a completely undesirable trend that needs to be broken.

Sunday Independent

The price of fearless journalism is sometimes too high

Death threats and assassination attempts don’t just come from the criminal world anymore. The anti-vax movement also put such pressure on a journalist.

Alan English
Editor-in-chief Sunday Independent

No editor of the *Sunday Independent*, Ireland’s most widely read newspaper, can consider the words “press safety” without thinking of Veronica Guerin, once our most high-profile journalist. There is a plaque in her memory at the Talbot Street headquarters of Mediahuis Ireland. It records that she was murdered on 26 June 1996 – shot dead in cold blood by some of the gangland criminals she exposed through her journalism week after week.

What, in the years since her death, has changed about the criminal world that Veronica wrote about? Very little, in one way. As I write this, Ireland is gripped by what has been dubbed the gangland trial of the decade. Charged with murder is a man called Gerry Hutch, known throughout the land as ‘The Monk’. The nickname was given to him by Veronica Guerin. So, not much has changed there. But in another way, the threat to the safety of our journalists is very different now than it was in 1996.

For a full year, another Sunday Independent journalist – Rodney Edwards – investigated Ireland’s most dangerous misinformation campaign: the anti-vax movement and its impact on the country’s efforts to roll out the Covid-19 vaccine.

In a series of articles, Rodney examined the rise in conspiracy theorists and their disturbing activities and revealed new information on a growing movement —including exposing their plans to disrupt. He also revealed the links between such groups and the far-right movement.

As a result of this journalism, a concerted effort was made by a group of anti-vaxxers to target Rodney. He received hundreds of abusive and intimidating messages and emails. He was informed that his home address had been posted on the dark web and had to increase his security measures. Following a death threat, the police monitored his home every day for six weeks. He was of course also fully supported by his employer.

Veronica Guerin was a free spirit, as well as a remarkable journalist. On the 25th anniversary of her murder, in 2021, the Sunday Independent asked some hard questions about whether the paper could have done more to keep her safe. Regardless of the threat and where it comes from, the right balance must always be struck between encouraging fearless reporting and doing everything possible to protect the lives of the people who can sometimes put themselves in harm’s way in delivering this journalism.

De Limburger

Self-censorship is perhaps the greatest danger

Would you report differently because of anonymous threats on social media? You probably would.

Bjorn Oostra
Editor-in-chief De Limburger

When we hear the terms “press freedom” and “press safety”, we tend to think of journalists whose lives are no longer safe because of their work. The fact that De Telegraaf reporter John van den Heuvel has to have permanent protection to be able to carry out his work is appalling. It can only be seen as a structural attack on free speech and thus on our democracy. A journalist requiring security guards in a country like the Netherlands is something that should never be considered normal.

As far as I’m concerned, the same applies to the constant abuse and threats that journalists face via social media. This breach of press safety is also harmful and, just like the threats against Van den Heuvel, could have far-reaching consequences. Of course we can’t put a police officer behind every colleague who is taunted on social media by some anonymous abuser, but the feeling that lingers after receiving a threat on Facebook is particularly impactful.

Because what do you do as a reporter when underneath your piece on, say, the construction of a road, some guy lets it be known that he doesn’t appreciate the attention given to the subject and next time he’ll come and tell you that himself loud and clear? Do you ignore it, or do you keep a tiny bit of consideration for that guy in the back of your mind when it’s time for a follow-up piece?

I fear it’s the latter. Especially if the threat comes not from a furious local resident but, for example, from angry farmers or raging hooligans. The violation of our safety by anonymous posters on social media can result in self-censorship. And that could eventually lead to a dramatic curtailment of press freedom, with all the consequences that brings.

About this story
Journalist Willem Groeneveld exercised his right to speak in court after his home was attacked. These are his words.

One night in the summer of 2021, Molotov cocktails were put through the door of journalist Willem Groeneveld and his girlfriend. The reason for the attack was an article that Groeneveld, working for the city blog Sikkom (part of Mediahuis Noord) had written about a protest against Covid policy. The perpetrators, who in the months before had campaigned in various ways against Groeneveld, decided to go to the journalist's house that night. They knew his address because a landlord that Groeneveld regularly wrote about had posted it online in revenge.

The perpetrators of the attack were quickly apprehended and sentenced a year later to five years' imprisonment and TBS. During the trial, Groeneveld exercised his right to make a victim impact statement. In the statement, published in full here, he says the case has only losers. He also says his journalistic freedom has been partially taken away from him, "by forces screaming that the press is not free".

The police shared images of the suspects.
Photo Police North Netherlands unit

My journalistic freedom has been partially **taken away**, by forces screaming that the press is not free

When I heard that the suspects had been arrested, I knew I would exercise my right to speak. But what I want to say changes by the day, by the hour. I've been reflecting on it for almost a year. During that time, there have been many moments when I've felt compassion for the suspects.

One of them became a father a couple of years ago. Both of them were trying to get their lives back on track, when luck hadn't always been on their side. Those lives have now been destroyed, as have the lives of their loved ones.

When we'd completed the first legal forms, my girlfriend and I decided to treat ourselves to a nice dinner to end a tough day. For the first time, I wondered what Tjeerd and Jaimy would eat that evening. When Russia invaded Ukraine with the threat of nuclear weapons, I was happy to be with

my girlfriend and cat. To have my family close by. That closeness represents security. At the same time, I wondered how Tjeerd, Jaimy and their families would experience that moment, far from each other. My thoughts regularly turn to those men.

There are only losers in court today. Those guys put our lives at risk, turned our world upside down and threw their own lives away. They have, I think, been set adrift by disruptive global developments. Persuaded by constant fake news and disinformation. Driven to despair by known troublemakers and conspiracy theorists. And legitimised by politicians who dismiss journalists and fan the flames for electoral gain. Scared that it's all a big conspiracy. Afraid that key pillars of democracy are all part of the big lie. Convinced that doctors, nurses, journalists, scientists, teachers, politicians, cops, lawyers and judges are conspiring to deprive them of everything.

Those forces are causing people to become radicalised. Jaimy and Tjeerd might have thought they were doing society a favour by silencing me. They'd been completely brainwashed, the police investigation shows. They're victims of malicious forces, and of their own limited ability to see through them. The Dunning-Kruger effect is a dangerous bitch, and it's something to be pitied.

But it never lasts long. Every night I have to check the alarm is on. Every time, there's the memory of that night, the reason the alarm is there. And things go wrong sometimes, too. That creates quite a commotion. Police in the street and security at the door. Lots of stress, lots of fuss. When I go out, I have to think about the steps I take. Where should I go, where should I avoid? Can I go to the football, should I give it a miss? If I go, my girlfriend is left behind worrying: as long as nothing happens, as long as he comes back home. That fear often keeps her awake until I finally fall into bed hours later.

At unexpected moments, we get a big scare. Like the other day, when our downstairs neighbours had a party and two boys were smoking in the stairwell; they had no idea about our trauma. I was awake, my girlfriend was sleeping and woke up because of the noise and the voices. She dashed downstairs, deathly pale and with a fear about her I'd not seen before. A while back, someone in the neighbourhood lit the first barbecue. I immediately switched into a state of flight. The smell of fire took me straight back to the fear of that night.

In an episode of The Wire, two men throw Molotov cocktails into a house. With greater success. Everything burns to the ground. The woman living there dies, her son suffers severe burns. That scene haunted me for a long time. What if? The trial, conversations with prosecutors, our lawyer and the media, all the hearings, the downplaying by the defendants' lawyers: it brings it all back, it drains our energy. The event itself and the aftermath have put everything under stress: the relationship, our family, my girlfriend and myself.

We sought professional mental help. That's not something I ever thought I'd have to do, and certainly not as a result of my work. Not because I have heartache, but because I write about issues in Groningen. Because I research, interpret, report and hold people to account. For the first time in my career, I feel hampered in doing my job.

For some time I've been threatened and intimidated. By the real estate sector I often write about, and by other groups. Never has my work been so dangerous. Firebombs thrown in the dead of night, into the house where my girlfriend and I were sleeping. In the narrow hall with the wooden floor, full of coats, umbrellas and boxes. Right next to the porch, which is also the only exit from the neighbour's house. For the first time, I felt – no, I was – genuinely in danger because of my work. That feeling persists. I have to watch my words, I can't go just anywhere anymore. My journalistic freedom has been partially taken away, by forces screaming that the press is not free.

> **"There are only losers in court today. Those guys put our lives at risk and threw their own lives away**

And it's not just my freedom, it's my colleagues' too. The attack was a real shock, for the newsrooms at *Dagblad van het Noorden*, RTV Noord, OOGTV and of course *Sikkom*. My immediate colleagues have taken measures to increase their safety. It's hacking away at the watchdog of democracy, and at other institutions that are central to society.

Police officers have been threatened by the same movements, their home addresses made public. Virologists receive threatening mail. Hospitals are besieged by phone. Politicians are intimidated in their own homes. Days after the attack, public health staff said they no longer dared to visit the neighbourhood with the vaccination bus because the suspects had been protesting there – a protest I reported on.

For me, this is terrorism. Using violence, intimidation and threats with a political motive to impose your will or to silence others. As sad as it is for the suspects, we need to clamp down on these actions before the whole of society is taken hostage by a small group of malicious radicals.

This case is bigger than the harm done to my girlfriend and me. It represents a dangerous development in society, which has found a breeding ground in existing and future social disharmony, such as the current debate around nitrogen. We have to act against this dynamic that undermines our democracy. In national, regional and local politics, in neighbourhoods and streets, among families and friends. In schools, offices, sports clubs and universities. In the media. And in the courts. To make it clear that terrorism doesn't pay. So that the next potential attacker thinks twice and that public health worker dares to enter the neighbourhood again.

That's why I'm hoping for a ruling that does justice to every aspect of this sad case.

The Mediahuis Festival of Journalism is **a celebration where we can all learn**

The first Mediahuis Festival of Journalism took place in 2022. It was a joyous occasion for some 150 journalists to learn from each other, and the birth of a new tradition.

Festival of Journalism, edition 2022. **Photos Olivier Middendorp**

What's even more enjoyable than journalism? Talking about journalism. Anyone taking a tour of a newsroom will always hear journalists talking about their work, a new angle, an inspiring or reluctant interviewee, an anecdote from a report or the search for a good source. However, those conversations are usually limited to colleagues in our own newsrooms. That's a pity because journalists – and the titles they work for – can really benefit from each other's knowledge. Especially since so many opportunities have appeared in recent years for gathering information, telling a story and finding an audience. More knowledge also makes you stronger in your trade – not unimportant in a world where journalists are no longer accepted as an authority.

Not an enforced addition to a busy workload, but a fun event – that was the thinking behind the Mediahuis Festival of Journalism. And it was certainly festive at the TivoliVredenburg venue in Utrecht. On 18 and 19 May, some 150 colleagues from our Dutch and Belgian titles gathered for the first edition of the festival, for two days of new insights, knowledge sharing, workshops, debates and expected and unexpected encounters. Rasmus Nielsen, director of the Reuters Institute at the University of Oxford, kicked off the first edition with his views on the latest developments in the news media world.

Other topics covered included the appeal of crime journalism, approaches to regional investigative reporting, using data to write better stories and find the right audience, the recipe for success for podcasts and more. There were external experts on the various stages, but above all lots of Mediahuis colleagues who talked about their experiences.

Between the programmed events there was a lot of laughter and chat, as well as serious commitments to take on projects together. The music bingo turned out to be a great way to showcase non-journalistic knowledge and work with a neighbour you'd never met.

They were happy days for the festival organisers too. Of course, there had been nerves beforehand, but from the first moment it was clear: this is going well. And that was evident afterwards from all the positive and constructive evaluations. So on to the second edition, to be held again at TivoliVredenburg on 16 May 2023, and this time, our colleagues from Ireland, Germany and Luxembourg will join us too. Those who want to relive last year's event can find all the videos and photos on the festival's website: journalistiekfestival.nl. We're all looking forward to it!

Organisation 2022

Marcella Breedeveld (NRC), Paulien Simonides (Mediahuis Noord), Esther van der Meer (Mediahuis Noord), Karen Peeters (NRC), Nathalie Vercammen (Mediahuis België), Inge Carels (Mediahuis België), Ralf van der Linden (Mediahuis Limburg), Shi Jan Mei (Mediahuis Noord) and Yannick Mortier (NRC).

A press tour of liberation

Mischa van Diepen (27), correspondent for De Telegraaf, made seven trips to Ukraine in 2022 This is his story in word and image.

Destroyed buildings in the suburbs of Kyiv.

Top
In the car with fixer Volodymyr Gamalytsja.

Middle
The destroyead council offices in Mykolaiv.

Below
At a dacha complex above Mykolaiv, Mischa lent a hand distributing food parcels to refugees from the front city.

The only souls on the streets of Irpin were road workers and cleaners sweeping away shrapnel. But there, on a hill, I saw a few residents entering a domed Orthodox church. This was the first service since the liberation of the city, a gateway to Kiev.

Icy spring air came in through smashed windows; the breath of churchgoers in their winter clothes was visible. Lena Konstantinovna, in her late 50s, let her tears flow.

“They behaved like animals, with incomprehensible fury,” she said, weeping. Lena’s cousin died trying to get his child to safety. Whether the child got away, she couldn’t say. A week after the liberation, the outside world knew about the atrocities committed on the streets around Lena. For the past month, she hadn’t gone much further than her own courtyard.

Irpin is next to Bucha, the city whose name has become synonymous with Russian war crimes. I’d arrived in Kyiv by train the afternoon before this first church service, following a two-day journey from Amsterdam.

I started as a correspondent for *De Telegraaf* in Russia in October 2021, but Ukraine soon became my patch. Having travelled around the country in February and March, it became clear in early April that the main story was on the fringes of the capital. The corpses were literally lying in the streets as the Russians departed.

So I too had to get there, to the outskirts of Kyiv, to do another story for the Saturday edition. Through a journalist friend I met Oleksandr, a young man with a car. That was all I needed.

On the phone with this unknown Oleksandr, though, I ran into a problem: how do you get to a region where the Russians have only just left? Oleksandr knew some soldiers who could take us to Bucha and Irpin. But they were only available on Friday: too late for a report in the Saturday paper. Even in a war, there are deadlines.

That Thursday, our only alternative was to drive out of Kyiv and hope for the best. But Oleksandr couldn’t guarantee how far we would get. The area had been demined; we later saw a blackened corpse that had been retrieved from under the rubble.

Finally, we witnessed the devastation of these formerly peaceful suburbs. And Oleksandr’s daily fee was suddenly reduced: a large part of it turned out to have been for the soldiers with whom we would have travelled.

Following the liberation of new territories, journalists were eager to move in as soon as possible behind the Ukrainian troops. That’s where press freedom and press safety can clash.

The Ukrainian authorities have two interests. They don’t want to let large groups of onlookers into areas where the danger hasn’t yet passed. But they do want to urgently bring to light what happened under occupation.

The compromise: put all the journalists in a couple of buses and drive them to the disaster zone. Several tours were scheduled the week after the liberation of the southern port

> **In October 2021, I became the Russia correspondent for De Telegraaf, but Ukraine soon became my patch**

Stretchers from an organisation of volunteer paramedics in the centre of Kyiv.

Top
Hostomel, where the Russians made an air assault on Antonov airfield.

Middle
Lyuba and her husband chased four Russian soldiers from her garden in the town of Voznesensk.

Below
Destruction in Irpin.

Facing page
In Vinnytsia, toys lie at the site where Liza, a girl with Down's syndrome, was among those killed by a Russian missile.

city of Kherson, with the lurid highlights announced in chat groups for local media. A visit to civilian torture chambers was to be followed by a viewing of demining operations.

That's where the problem is for us journalists. You have to be careful not to be taken for a ride by the authorities. It was no coincidence that many journalists saw the exhumation of mass graves in Bucha: they had often been driven there in buses.

When it came to my reports, I managed to avoid the press buses. And I wasn't the only one.

The biggest media, especially those from Britain and the US, can often arrange VIP treatment due to their influence, budgets and extensive contacts among the military. That's how the New York Times was able to move into Bucha in the wake of Ukrainian troops.

And while the mere mortals had to wait for a bus tour to Kherson, camera crews from Sky News and CNN were already in the liberated city, accompanied by Ukrainian troops. The images of a British reporter being hugged by Ukrainians as if he were their liberator are already historic.

The Ukrainian army's leadership quickly announced that the crews in question had been stripped of their accreditation for violating a ban on entry to Kherson. But that may have been for appearances' sake: I think the army top brass was happy with this publicity.

The bridge of the dead, where people from Irpin tried to flee.

Top
Devastation in Kyiv's suburbs.

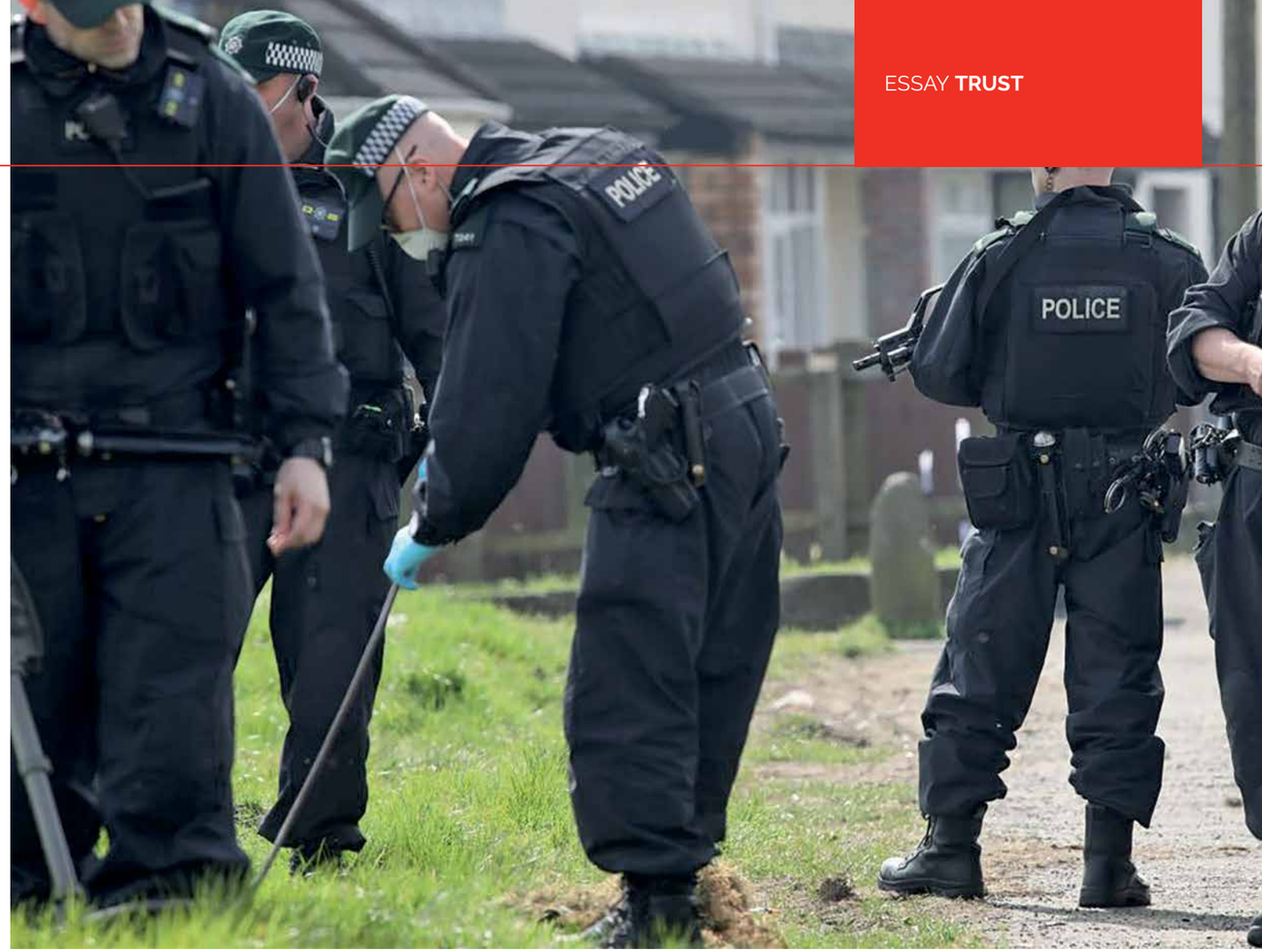
Below
The first train from Poland into Ukraine in early March.

Facing page
In March, Odessa's historic centre was impassable, for tanks and pedestrians.

"The images of a British reporter being hugged by Ukrainians as if he were their liberator are already historic

Sam McBride is the Northern Ireland Editor of the Belfast Telegraph and the Sunday Independent. He has worked for the BBC, The Economist and is a regular presence on radio and television, giving analysis of events which impact on Northern Irish politics.

Living in a fortress and never having your back to the door



The images of a British reporter being hugged by Ukrainians as if he were their liberator are already historic. **Photo Getty Images**

Death threats and attacks put pressure on journalists in Northern Ireland. The perpetrators are rarely brought to justice.

I can't remember whether it was 7am or 8am when my bedside radio alarm awakened me on 19 April 2019, but I remember what followed: "A journalist has been shot dead in Derry".

I didn't know Lyra McKee, but immediately recognised her name. Northern Ireland is a small society, and the world of journalism is even smaller within it. Even amid the horror of the Troubles which saw 3,500 people killed over 30 years, a journalist's slaying was exceedingly rare.

Lyra had been eight when the 1998 Good Friday Agreement brought an end to the Troubles; she was meant to live out her life in peace, but was killed doing her job as a journalist.

A year earlier, we'd both been on a panel discussing the future of the media – all the usual things familiar to journalists: How to make journalism pay, whether paywalls were the future, what the media does badly. She was bright and passionate and full of energy. And now she was dead at the age of 29.

The bullet which killed Lyra had been fired at police; dissident republicans were almost certainly hoping to kill a police officer rather than a journalist when the gunman used the cover of a riot to fire towards police lines.

The fact this had not happened before was largely due to luck. Journalists have been covering serious rioting virtually every year in Northern Ireland for more than half a century. In June 2011, award-winning Press Association photographer Niall Carson was shot in the leg during riots in Belfast.

My *Belfast Telegraph* colleague Allison Morris has not only been present at countless riots but has the scars to prove

> **"The more chilling threat to journalists is not those who get caught in cross-fire when doing their jobs, but those told they will be killed**

it. In 2009, a roof slate hurled by rioters in Belfast's Ardoyne area slashed open her lip, requiring facial surgery.

But, as deadly as such situations can be, the more chilling threat to journalists is not those who get caught in cross-fire when doing their jobs, but those told they will be killed.

Allison moved house 16 months ago; the police have already been to her door three times to warn her of death threats. "At times I dismiss this, and other times I feel really unsafe. Belfast is such a small city and Northern Ireland is such a small place," she said.

"I've had incidents where I'm court reporting and had to be given a security escort out of court because people were threatening to kill me, saying they knew where I lived.

"There are two types of death threat. There are those phoned in anonymously, which I don't take too seriously because they could be anybody. But the last few times they have been intelligence-led, which means that an informer has passed on information and that's a lot more concerning."

Ciaran Barnes, chief reporter at the Sunday Life newspaper, has been threatened multiple times by paramilitaries and criminals.

In 14 years at Sunday Life, he has received five separate TM1 notices – the police bureaucracy which conveys death threats. They have been issued by both republican and loyalist paramilitaries and criminal gangs about whom he has written.

He said: "Because of this I live in a heavily-fortified home with bullet proof windows and doors, security cameras, motion-activated sensors, and alarms linked to the nearest PSNI and fire station.

"Constant threats also limit your movements. I rarely venture into the centre of Belfast at night and like to sit with sight of the door in coffee shops or pubs so I can see who is coming in and out. That sounds extreme, and probably is, but it's better to be cautious.

"Despite that, I wouldn't change what I do and take solace from the many victims of criminality I have helped over the years, and our investigations which have led to drug dealers being jailed, prison units being closed down, and paramilitary rackets being busted by the PSNI."

He said that victims of the criminals about whom he writes are often voiceless, coming to journalists as a last resort after being failed by the authorities: "We've a duty to help them, even if it's only in a small way and to shine a light on the criminals making their lives a misery."

When the police deliver death threats, they generally give no information on who the threat is from, something he said should be changed because knowing the group would make it easier to avoid certain areas where those criminals are in control.

Sunday Life editor Martin Breen endorsed that concern, saying that the absence of detail on the threat makes it hard to judge the level of precautions which should be taken.

However, he said that the Police Service of Northern Ireland has got much better in how they handle threats to journalists.

He said that a pattern has emerged in recent years where threats will be made after articles exposing loyalist crime gangs' criminality.

"We have identified and photographed major gangland figures who have remained largely anonymous until then. As they have taken great care to stay below the radar, they direct their anger towards us.

"None of the threats have stopped us from reporting on their activities and we will continue to do so. The best way for these threats to be reduced is by police bringing some of those responsible before the courts but to date there has been little success on this front."

> **"The law has been used by some powerful figures to attempt to suppress public interest journalism**

Martin O'Hagan, a reporter at the *Sunday World*, another Mediahuis newspaper, was murdered in 2001. His loyalist paramilitary killers, who targeted him because of his exposure of their crimes, have never been brought to justice.

The Sunday World's offices were firebombed in 1999 and a decade later, its then editor, Jim McDowell, was brutally beaten in daylight in Belfast city centre.

As elsewhere, Northern Ireland's journalists do not only face physical threats. Social media abuse is constant – especially, but not only, for female reporters. For young journalists in particular, who had no experience of journalism prior to social media, the lynch mob mentality is brutal.

Those of us who have had time to develop thicker skins need to be mindful of the impact on a young journalist of facing hundreds of abusive messages simply for doing their job – and perhaps for doing it very well.

Similarly, the law has been used by some powerful figures in Northern Ireland to attempt to suppress public interest journalism. I could paper my walls with legal threats, many of them spurious, but designed to discourage further investigation of individuals with something to hide.

Northern Ireland's libel laws were belatedly reformed this year, bringing them closer to those of England. But Northern Ireland's two dominant parties, the DUP and Sinn Féin, united in rare agreement about diluting the law. It just so happens that the DUP and Sinn Féin are notorious for their libel threats.

Northern Ireland's unusual system of government involves no opposition in the devolved parliament. Now it has no government at all, making media scrutiny indispensable.

My colleagues at Mediahuis, and elsewhere in Northern Ireland's media, will continue to not only do our jobs, but to press the authorities to adequately protect journalists.

Luxemburger Wort

Trust has to be earned

Distrust towards media leads to some citizens turning away from news altogether. Journalists mustn't let that happen.

Roland Arens
Editor-in-chief Luxemburger Wort

The causes of the oft-lamented loss of trust in the media seem to be largely known. When information and news are lumped together with untruths and lies, the credibility of journalism is eroded. As a result, readers are becoming increasingly suspicious of the media as a whole and some are turning away from the information with which they're bombarded, day in and day out.

The pandemic years, and certainly the global rise of political populism, have, if anything, accelerated this trend. Conspiracy theories and disinformation about Covid-19 spread faster than journalists could gather science-based facts. "You only write what the government tells you to write," is an accusation our journalists have often faced in one form or another, in letters to the editor, focus groups or online comments. During Covid-related demonstrations, the loaded term Lügenpresse or "lying press" was thrown at the media.

Fortunately, most of our readers react much more calmly than this. They've known their newspapers for a long time and so are still willing to give them the benefit of the doubt. But traditional news outlets can no longer rely on being seen as reliable, credible or even objective.

A virus of lies is spreading through the media ecosystem, warned Filipino journalist and Nobel laureate Maria Ressa in an interview with Deutschlandfunk in the summer of 2022. "We are losing the battle against disinformation globally. That doesn't mean we give up. It just means we need to tell everyone: the battle is now."

Media will always have to work hard to earn readers' trust, especially, of course, among generations of digital natives. That means reporting from the reader's perspective and bringing transparency to newsrooms. We need to show readers how journalists work and how the result of this collective activity differs from random information scattered across social networks. We need to make it clear how journalists add value and why journalistic deontology is the best guarantee of reliability, credibility and impartiality.

De Standaard

Better expectation than conviction

Distrust of media is growing, including among politicians. But we have to take even radical criticism seriously.

Karel Verhoeven
Editor-in-chief De Standaard

Trust in a newspaper is personal, but it's also political. As editors, we can best work on the personal, intimate side. The political side of trust is trickier. Intimate trust stems from an expectation. You can shape and adjust that. Political trust comes more from a conviction. And beliefs are rigid.

First, intimacy. Rarely have we had so great a chance to change. Thanks to the digital shift, we are reinventing our platforms, formats and even journalistic genres. What we publish, when and for whom. One question should always guide us in this regard: what has value? I like to rephrase "trust" as "reliability". Always passing the reader's test, the ideal reader, the reader you hope to nurture. Delivering sufficient value. Passing the falsification test. Truth may be relative; falsehood is not. Building trust is then about creating an interesting expectation and unexpectedly fulfilling it.

The reader's response is intuitive. Ideally, they read you based on instinct. Every article, every alert, every newsletter, every fresh copy of the paper feeds that intimate relationship. It's about genuine trust, and it's mutual. Do editors dare to trust their readers? In what they click on and how long they read? If you trust the reader, the right data will tell you how well you're doing.

The political side of trust is less manageable. The most perfidious attacks on the media that we experience in a solidly liberal democracy like Belgium undermine the belief that the media pursue the truth. The radical right is making this breach of trust its political project. The press are painted as servants of the regime of truth. They stand in the way of the will of the people. The protests against Covid regulations showed that a not inconsiderable section of the population holds that belief.

Like any radical criticism, this outburst deserves to be considered and responded to thoughtfully. It may not lead to a real conversation, much less convince the non-believers. But that doesn't matter. It makes us editors more aware of what expectations we can realistically create. It sharpens the demand for truth. Do we really serve the quest for truth? Do we show enough imagination to do it? After a year in which everything the establishment thought possible has been turned upside down, with war, inflation, energy shortages and protectionism, humility is a crucial quality for journalists.

Irish Independent

Who knows what is still true in this world?

How nice it would be if trust was the same as being nice. But trust sometimes means telling a difficult truth.

Cormac Bourke
Editor-in-chief Irish Independent and Independent.ie

Does our audience really think it is important where their information comes from?

There are so many choices for them about what they can watch, what they can listen to or what they can read. Surely they must wonder if it would be so bad if some of what they're being told isn't true.

Does it really matter? Won't they find out the truth in the end?

After all, for as long as humans have had language, untruths and half-truths have always circulated among us socially: an item of idle gossip between neighbours, a few words at the school gate, an aside in a shop or in a bar.

But in the past, this type of information was typically passed on by someone you knew in some way, usually by someone you had met.

You had some sense of the source and some sense of how reliable they were. Metaphorically, the world was a much smaller place. It was certainly easier to make a judgment. Now, that world is nearly beyond measure thanks to ubiquitous social media.

Half-truths and lies can circulate freely and anonymously, often pretending to be from sources from which they do not originate, often fuelled by algorithms, which try to tell you what they think you want to hear.

In this world, it's not certain that anyone will simply find out the truth in the end.

Trust means you know where your information is coming from and you know the motivation of those providing it.

It would be simple if trusting someone was the same as liking them. But that's not what trust means. If you're worthy of someone's trust, sometimes you have to tell them things they might not like.

Neither does trust mean that you're always right. Trust means we admit we can get things wrong and are honest with our audience when we do.

Does our audience really think it is important where their information comes from?

It's up to us to convince them that it is, in fact, vital.

Trust is therefore an opportunity for journalism – and it's one we must grasp.

FrieschDagblad
Vol overtuiging.

Happy to talk to a journalist. But don't use my name

Good journalism requires recognisable sources and interviewees. What if people will only speak anonymously?

Ria Kraa
Editor-in-chief Friesch Dagblad

The score for 2022: the word "trust" appeared 879 times in the *Friesch Dagblad*. Most of these mentions were in the family notice section, and were in fact about trust in the Lord and Saviour. In the news pages, it's more about lack of trust. In just about anything: the incorruptibility of the European Parliament, the vision of Mark Rutte, the ethics of Fifa, the point of holding another climate summit, the likelihood of an Elfstedentocht, the best recipe for gnocchi.

And of course, lack of trust in the press. Again this year there's been a host of reports of harassment, aggression and violence towards journalists. That's the visible side of failing trust. There is also an invisible side. Increasingly, reporters are speaking to people who "don't want my name in the paper". Ordinary, decent, nice people who are quite willing to talk, but who back off as soon as they're asked for their personal details. Not because they feel their safety is in question or their job at stake, but from a general trepidation: oof, the media, better be careful.

They sneak into the newspaper largely unnoticed, those unnamed interviewees, so a refresher was needed: guys, anonymity should really be an exception and if we allow it, we need to be explicit about why.

It's a clear rule, but it doesn't solve the problem. It's understandable: people distrust not necessarily the press but perhaps their own thoughtlessness. An awkward quote doesn't disappear after a day into the bin and thus oblivion, as it used to; now it's online forever. So how do you entice people to speak to a reporter and give their name? How do you turn your own discomfort into persuasion? How do you succinctly explain why it's meaningful and important to speak your mind as well as your name, on a journalistic platform where your words won't be twisted or taken out of context? How do you carry that message confidently, without coming across as a rabid evangelist?

Gaining the trust of the people you want to write about, having to explain the importance and reliability of your work: it's tricky. And it's uncomfortable that we have to do it.

nrc›

Show as much as possible – and be honest about what remains hidden

Journalistic transparency is an important building block for trust. Tell the reader what the journalist can and can't write, and what the editors are unsure of.

René Moerland
Editor-in-chief NRC

Two years ago, Mediahuis' annual report was devoted to trust in journalism. This year it's just a sub-section. It now comes under the umbrella of "press freedom and press safety". What does that tell us about the state of trust in journalism?

Our starting point is largely the same. You can't impose trust, you have to earn it. That calls for an exacting, self-reflective approach from the newsroom. We know that trust and relevance for *NRC*'s readers and listeners are the foundation stone of trust. And we can impose those: on ourselves. That is our promise, our pact.

What are the other building blocks? From experience, we know that transparency has become more important. So when our economics editor spends a day at Amazon's largest sorting centre in the Netherlands, we explain the conditions under which he worked. When Kim Bos and Lineke Nieber spent a week working at two abortion clinics, we had to explain not only the restrictions they were working with, but also why we considered them acceptable and what our reporters had set out to achieve.

We have learned a lot about transparency from podcasts, where the personal involvement of the creators is increasingly a part of the story. You heard that, for example, in our podcast series on the Qatar World Cup. Gabriella Adèr and Joris Kooiman investigated why the state of Qatar is so interested in football and what that means for fans.

Transparency is also about mistakes. The details that make it to our corrections section show how high the bar is set. From our ombudsman – since September Arjen Fortuin – we expect him to not only look at facts but also to critically weigh how we address subjects. Is our reporting on climate change too "alarmist", or not enough? The war in Ukraine: are we underestimating the Russian perspective? We think not – and we are proud of our reporter who has been able to work from Moscow in difficult circumstances this year.

MEDIAHUIS
IRELAND

Never forget what good journalism is about

In the online world, a 186-year-old regional newspaper is finding a new audience. Trust remains vital for that connection.

Jim Hayes
Editor-in-chief Mediahuis Ireland Regionals

When our oldest newspaper, *The Sligo Champion*, was first printed in June of 1836 nobody could have imagined that 186 years later it would be publishing local news with a global reach. It's the same story for each of the Champion's ten local paper stablemates.

The past year has seen impressive online growth at Mediahuis Ireland regionals and there is now a bigger audience for our local news output than at any time in history. That's the direct result of a local news project through Independent.ie, recognised in 2022 for innovation with wins at both the NewsBrands Ireland Journalism Awards and the Local Ireland Awards.

While this is hugely positive at a time of declining print sales, it is also an ever-present reminder of our increased responsibility in a world of false information and social media noise. As now former Taoiseach Micheál Martin said at the launch of the Future of Media Commission, set up to examine how Ireland's media can deliver public service aims over the next decade and beyond: "At a time when disinformation is on the rise, sustainable and impartial journalism has never been more important".

For over a hundred years and sometimes much more, all our regional print titles have fostered a relationship with local communities, built on trust and integrity. We are now cementing new relationships within a wider online community and, while the millions of page views and millions of minutes of attention time don't tell the whole story, they do show we are making a connection and continuing to make a difference with the same professionalism that sustained our newspapers through famine, world wars, rebellion and civil upheaval.

According to the first report from the Future of Media Commission, 75 per cent of the Irish public have "high or very high" trust in their local newspaper. This is very reassuring, but as the transition from print to digital gains pace, the challenges will multiply. We must remember it's not about the platform, it's about the source and that by adhering to the same basic guiding principles of good journalism that have served us well through a long history in print, Mediahuis Ireland can continue to be the trusted voice of local news.

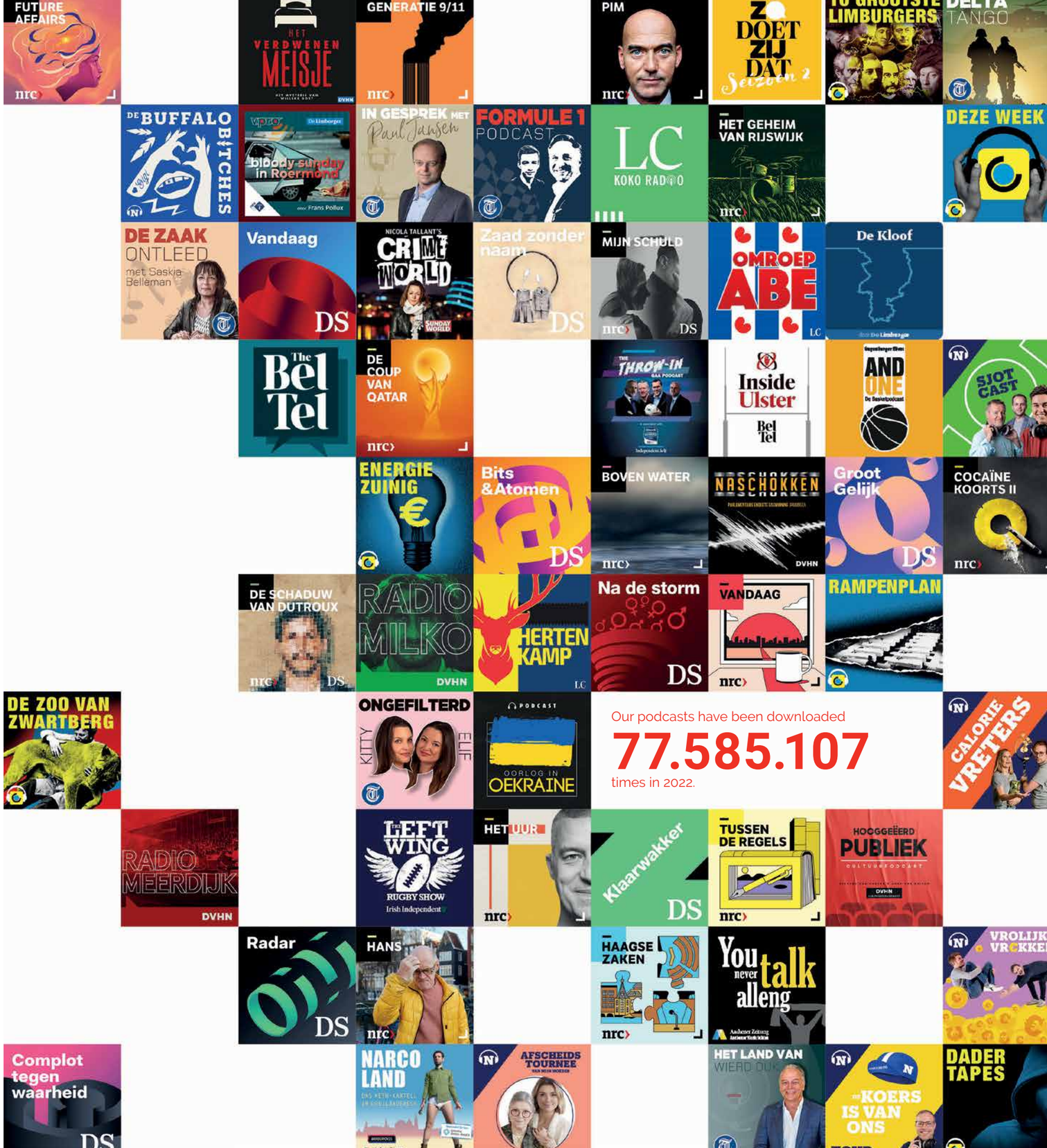
With a podcast, you experience the story up close – as if it were **just for you**

Journalism is all about words. In any case, that's true of Mediahuis' titles, where articles are written and published every day – every hour, even. Now, in addition to readers, we're also increasingly serving our listeners, through journalism in audio form.

Here, too, it's all about words, but often a little more informally, with more space for the journalist's own voice and more opportunities to take listeners along on the journalistic quest. It just feels more intimate.

That audio quest could be a crime story – a surefire crowd-pleaser in every country. But politics, sports, science and music also lend themselves perfectly to podcasting. Journalists find it a great way to tell their stories and the audience is growing every day. Initially, podcasts attracted mainly young audiences, who were sometimes introduced to journalism for the first time in this way. Now, readers of all ages are discovering the joy of listening.

Making podcasts is labour-intensive and therefore quite expensive – especially when it comes to series that require a lot of research and editing. In every newsroom, there are more ideas than there is budget. But it's good to see that the Mediahuis titles have already built up an impressive audio library.



Our podcasts have been downloaded

77.585.107

times in 2022.

Which stories from 2022 have made an **impact**?

Name a story from 2022 that you're especially proud of because it made a real impact. That question was put to all editors-in-chief. An almost impossible choice, they all said, because there are so many great, newsworthy and interesting stories being told. Here are a few examples from that huge range. Scan the QR codes to read the articles.

Nieuwsblad

Zoveel duurder is HelloFresh dan zelf naar supermarkt gaan: „Wablief? Ik val bijna achterover"

Read here →

NRC

Onder bejubeld Kamervoorzitter Khadija Arib knakte de ene na de andere ambtenaar

Read here →

Het Belang van Limburg

Veerle Heeren opnieuw onder vuur na 'leugens' over onderzoek Comité P

Read here →

Aachener Zeitung

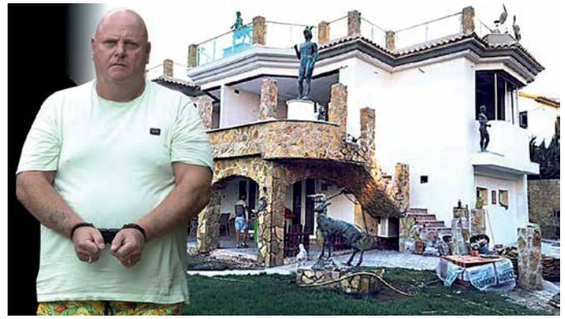
Aachener will Hansemannplatz umbenennen lassen

Read here →

Noordhollands Dagblad

Het giftige geheim van Oreo-koekjes maakt Olam een van de grootste ammoniakvervuilers van ons land

Read here →



Sunday World

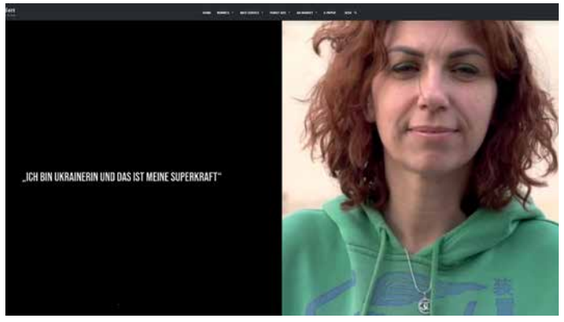
Nicola Tallant: 'Johnny Morrissey flaunted his wealth on the Costa – he thought he was untouchable'

Read here →

De Telegraaf

Russen vluchten naar Finland

Read here →



Luxemburger Wort

“Ich bin Ukrainerin und das ist meine Superkraft”

Read here →

Mediahuis Ireland Regionals

Heartbreak as young mother Lisa passes away just hours after getting married from her hospital bed

Read here →

Dagblad van het Noorden

Ontsteek hier digitaal een fakkel voor Groningen

Read here →

De Limburger

‘Mijn kinderen mogen racen, maar zou het wel anders aanpakken dan mijn vader en ik het destijds hebben gedaan’

Read here →

Sunday Independent

Women must be free to speak without fear of trans backlash

Read here →

Belfast Telegraph

Northern Ireland election results: Sinn Fein becomes largest party at Stormont with 27 seats - as it happened

Read here →

Leeuwarder Courant

Harm en Tsjitske uit Gorredijk waren tot het allerlaatst 'tegearre'

Read here →

Irish Independent

“Ashling was our youngest, a little angel. Our rock” - devastated parents pay tribute to ‘beautiful, talented’ girl

Read here →

De Standaard

‘Zoveel horror had ik niet verwacht’

Read here →

Gazet van Antwerpen

Onze reporter interviewt slachtoffer van uitbuiting op Borealis-werf: „Al maanden geen geld naar mijn familie kunnen sturen”

Read here →

Friesch Dagblad

West gaat open om verkeersdruk in Joure te verlichten, De Fryske Marren houdt rekening met wegafsluiting van een half jaar

Read here →

This edition of the Journalistic Annual Report again contains many beautiful, interesting, inspiring examples of journalistic efforts. The public - readers, listeners and viewers - see only the end products, at most with the name of one or two journalists or photographers. None of these productions would be possible without the efforts and creative engagement of our designers, editors-in-chief, photo desks, producers, digital editors and all the colleagues in the newsrooms and other parts of the group who, day in and day out, ensure the titles can fulfil their journalistic duty.

Thank you!

The Mediahuis news brands are focused on the future and the news of today. But they also have a long and rich history. Our oldest title dates back to the 18th century.

Het Belang van Limburg
Founded 1879
Number of subscribers 82,243
Total reach 510,500

De Standaard
Founded 1918
Number of subscribers 112,557
Total reach 653,200

Nieuwsblad
Founded 1929
Number of subscribers 199,364
Total reach 1,611,300

Gazet van Antwerpen
Founded 1891
Number of subscribers 67,168
Total reach 601,800

NRC
Founded 1970
Number of subscribers 297,078
Total reach 671,000

Mediahuis Nederland Regionale Dagbladen
Number of subscribers 166,942
Total reach 601,000

De Telegraaf
Founded 1893
Number of subscribers 409,778
Total reach 2,232,000

Friesch Dagblad
Founded 1903
Number of subscribers 8,303
Total reach 33,000

Leeuwarder Courant
Founded 1752
Number of subscribers 66,128
Total reach 200,000

Dagblad van het Noorden
Founded 1888
Number of subscribers 90,584
Total reach 233,000

De Limburger
Founded 1846
Number of subscribers 110,074
Total reach 354,000

Sunday World
Founded 1973
Total reach 559,000

Sunday Independent
Founded 1905
Number of subscribers 55,802
Total reach 1,409,800

Belfast Telegraph
Founded 1870
Number of subscribers 8,365
Total reach 335,700

Irish Independent
Founded 1905
Number of subscribers 55,802
Total reach 1,212,300

Mediahuis Ireland regional titles
Number of subscribers 1,459
Total reach 364,000

Luxemburger Wort
Founded 1848
Number of subscribers 45,035
Total reach 185,500

Aachener Zeitung
Founded 1946
Number of subscribers 50,224
Total reach 308,293

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Graphic design Nandan Lemmers, Yannick Mortier

Art direction Anne-Marije Vendeville

With thanks to the photo desks of our news brands.

2023 | www.mediahuis.com

MEDIAHUIS

2022 2022 2022

In March 2022, Odessa's historic centre was made inaccessible to tanks.
Photo Mischa van Diepen