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The crumbling pillars of the fourth estate

Citizens and civil society must be at the frontline of the battle to protect press freedom and denounce violent crimes against journalists



NAHELA NOWSHIN

THE year 2018 was not a good one for journalists, to put it mildly. According to Reporters Without Borders (RSF), at least 63 professional journalists were killed around the world in 2018, a marked increase by 15 percent since 2017. While the brutal killing of Jamal Kashoggi instantly captured global attention, let's not forget about the many other horrific crimes against journalists like the gruesome murder of Bulgarian television journalist Viktoria Marinova last year.

The media watchdog's bleak summary of 2018 was hardly surprising for many of us who had already been demoralised by the state of press freedom in our own countries and the acerbic rhetoric spewed against the media by world leaders. And the fact is, it's hardly possible to separate such toxic rhetoric from the ghastly crimes against journalists that we have seen in the recent past. The climate of fear is palpable globally as it is no longer just authoritarian countries who are bent on suppressing the media—so-called democracies, too, have joined the club.

In the last two years, since Mr Trump took office as the president of the United States, hateful rhetoric against the media has become normalised to a great extent as more and more people find it resonating with their views. Determined to bash the media at every opportunity, Mr Trump, armed with Twitter, which is apparently his favourite mode of communication, never fails to remind his 57.5 million followers on the social media platform of the dangers of fake news—a flashpoint for the spike in hate against the mainstream media in recent times. "Fake News is truly the ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE!" Mr Trump tweeted just this past Friday. One would have thought that in an age where reaching out to the masses has never been easier, thanks to the information and technology revolution, the myriad of other issues such as education and healthcare would get precedence over futile

wars against the media that too many seem to be buying into.

The point is that the rise in hatred against journalism and crimes against journalists didn't simply happen in a vacuum. Dangerous rhetoric has consequences. Even in Europe, which is known to have the most respect for press freedom, there has been an increase in hateful rhetoric against the media, according to RSF. Czech President Milos Zeman, who is quite well-known for having a distaste for the press, once held up a replica gun marked "for journalists" in a conference. This is the same man who had once referred to journalists as "manure" and "hyenas". In Asia,

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Philippine strongman Rodrigo Duterte's assault on the media has taken on an extreme nature, as, among other instances, the president has called out media organisations in the country using words such as "bullsh*t" and "garbage".

Governments around the world have increasingly resorted to taking the legislative route—a slippery slope—to get a grip on the media. Draconian laws that pose a significant threat to the future of journalism have been passed in many countries. In Bangladesh, the much-criticised Digital Security Act continues to loom over us, leading journalists and ordinary citizens to go to great lengths of self-censorship. That there is a lack of

respect for media workers became evident on too many occasions in the recent past, including during the road safety movement that rocked the nation last year, when journalists were beaten to a pulp in plain sight. And after such incidents, what is so conspicuous by its absence is the denouncement of attackers by the government and the latter standing up for the rights of journalists. Even the role of the law enforcement has been questionable on many such occasions. This has meant total impunity for those responsible for assaulting journalists, which essentially means giving them a *carte blanche* to do as they please.

It is thus no surprise that in the World Press Freedom Index 2018, 27 percent of countries on the world map (including Bangladesh) are ominously shaded in red—which stands for a "bad" situation of press freedom—while 35 percent of countries find themselves in the orange-shaded "problematic" zone. Bangladesh, with at least seven unsolved cases of murder of journalists, also came in at the 12th spot in CPJ's Global Impunity Index 2018 which "spotlights countries where journalists are slain and their killers go free."

It seems like a futile exercise to hark back to the oft-repeated role that a strong media plays in any democracy, given the growing disdain of the fourth estate the world over, including in Bangladesh. But as citizens who have certain inalienable rights—rights which cannot be taken away from us—we must do more to protect our right to be informed. We simply cannot watch the role of the media fade into oblivion which, I fear, will soon be a reality if injustices against journalists and suppression of the press are left unchecked. As conscious citizens, we must continue to demand justice for journalists and media workers who come under attack simply for reporting the news. And in a society where collusion of business and political interests is at an all-time high, citizens and civil society must be at the frontline of the battle so that the press is allowed to do its job.

Nahela Nowshin is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*.

What to do with a Bachelor of Arts?

RAFAEL LORENZO G CONEJOS

"HOW are you going to live on a literature degree?" my closest college friends asked me over and over as we walked through campus, with me carrying "Don Quixote" and they an accounting textbook.

Liberal arts majors get a bad reputation from their family and friends who are taking degrees in other fields, simply because they can't imagine how a history or philosophy degree can put food on the table or gas up (much less afford) a Porsche. The truth of the matter is that college isn't meant to cement a career path; it's meant to excite passion so that you discover what you want to do.

When asked, I always felt compelled to mention my course and quickly add that it is

we were leasing.

"But what was the rest of all for then?" someone asked me recently. It was for me, of course! Being able to market a product or service is easy when you have a way with words. In college, I participated in a science-fiction short story writing contest sponsored by Fully Booked. I was 18 and had never written a story in my life. My work got shortlisted, and I never got paid a cent. Nevertheless, it gave me the self-esteem to believe that I could write and, most importantly, that people would read it.

I went on to write personal essays that got published by the Philippine Daily Inquirer and Rappler one after another. They talked about the meaning of time, relationships, charity and the absence of it—essentially the human condition. By themselves, they weren't worth anything, but the skill of weaving words onto



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simply my pre-law. But, instead of asking what I adored about literature, everyone would wonder what law school I intended to go to. I caved under social pressure every time by announcing that I was where I was not because of any desire for the stories of Umberto Eco, but because it was a stepping stone to a goal recognised by adults as "acceptable."

"What law do you practice?" everyone else seems to ask me today, 14 years later. I graduated with a literature degree, passed the bar examinations and taught both academic fields in my respective alma mater. And yet I have not spent a day at a law firm, and the last time I was at court, it was simply to comply with a law school requirement.

Instead, I live and breathe managing a serviced apartment rental that my brother (also a lawyer who doesn't practice) and I put up when I was in law school. With no formal training in business, and laughable artistic skills, I nevertheless ended up designing, furnishing and leasing out rooms for a living. During law school, I was dangerously addicted to looking at picturesque and modern apartments in Google Images, hoping to replicate their minimalist style into the rooms

paper for the purpose of catching the reader's attention is golden, and you can exploit this skill wherever you want.

Years after the start of my essay contributions, I wrote about my business to Entrepreneur Magazine, the Inquirer, ANC, MYX TV, and courted them with the pitch of why their readers and viewers would want to hear about two lawyer brothers who decided to quit lawyering by becoming bellboys and interior decorators. All of these media entities were kind enough to give us a spotlight at one point or another through an article or even a TV interview. I used my "Atty," not on a professional level, but as a punch line, hoping it would tell a good story. My Bachelor of Arts taught me that everyone is willing to give time to a good story with characters who become unlikely heroes.

In law, I discovered that while lawyers read and write a lot, a great deal of them can't use the written word outside of drafting pleading and demand letters. This is a pity, because our connected world opens us to so many opportunities on how we use words that we can't afford to not be creative and versatile with their use.

Literature taught me how creativity can take my mind to different worlds, and law brought gravity to my consciousness after I reached them. In a manner of speaking, they complemented each other in a way that no career talk in college that I attended could ever prepare me for. Entrepreneurs have the exciting job of always thinking big, but also condensing it into something feasible for execution.

When picking a college degree, don't pick anything just because someone else told you to. Pick it because you feel you'll find a drive to excel in it through passion, and that you'll have fun doing it! In the end, wealth and happiness are gifted most to those who persevere when the only thing one wants to do is quit.

Rafael Lorenzo G Conejos is a lawyer and former professor of literature and law at De La Salle University Manila. He dedicates this piece to all those taking a liberal arts course. Copyright: Philippine Daily Inquirer/Asia News Network

ON THIS DAY
IN HISTORY

Norma McCorvey, left, who was Jane Roe in the 1973 Roe v Wade case, with her attorney, Gloria Allred, outside the Supreme Court in April 1989, where the High Court heard arguments in a case that could have overturned the Roe v Wade decision.

JANUARY 22, 1973
US SUPREME COURT LEGALISES ABORTION
In a historic decision, the US Supreme Court rules in Roe v Wade that women, as part of their constitutional right to privacy, can terminate a pregnancy during its first two trimesters.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

33 Small setback green
34 "Why don't we!"
36 Car ding
38 Benefit
40 Eucalyptus eater
43 "Rigoletto" composer
44 Film's Flynn
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YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

RAMS RELIEF
OPAL AGASSI
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MAO PAL
USUAL REPLY
GETTO AXE
TOSTADAS
TAHITI CONE
ADORER TUNA
ROGERS STAT

BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES

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