

Four journalists, one newspaper: Time Magazine's Person of the Year recognises the global assault on journalism

Written by Peter Greste, Professor of Journalism and Communications, The University of Queensland

Time Magazine has just announced its ["Person of the Year"](#) for 2018, and for once, it isn't one person. This time it is four people and a newspaper.

Collectively calling them "The Guardians", Time has awarded the accolade to the murdered Saudi journalist [Jamal Khashoggi](#), Filipino journalist [Maria Ressa](#) who edits the Rappler news website, two young Reuters journalists [Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo](#) currently serving seven-year sentences for exposing a massacre in Myanmar, and the staff of [The Capital Gazette](#) newspaper in the American town of Annapolis, Maryland, who continued publishing after five of their colleagues were gunned down in an attack in June.

Time's Person of the Year cover is reserved for those who the magazine judges have had "the greatest impact on the news", and not always for the better (it famously nominated Adolf Hitler in 1938). Its decision to name a collection of journalists is a marker not just of the impact those individuals have made, but a nod to the wider global crisis of confidence in journalism and "the truth". The nominees are there partly for what they have done, but also for what they have come to represent.

Khashoggi is undoubtedly the best known of the group. The grim details of his assassination, in which he was lured into the Saudi consulate in Istanbul to get documents for his marriage before he was strangled and dismembered with a bone saw, are as compelling as any airport novel. But they also exposed the cynicism of the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who has tried to present himself as Saudi Arabia's Western-friendly liberal saviour while ruthlessly and illiberally cracking down on dissenters.

As Khashoggi himself once asked in [a Washington Post column](#) :

Must we choose between movie theatres and our rights as citizens to speak out, whether in support of or critical of our government's actions?

Maria Ressa is less well-known but no less courageous. A former CNN correspondent, she co-founded Rappler seven years ago, building it into one of the most trusted independent sources of news in The Philippines.

Rappler has fearlessly covered President Duterte's authoritarian edicts, including his war on drugs that has taken an estimated 12,000 lives. In the process, she has weathered a storm of assaults from Duterte himself and his army of online trolls. She now faces up to 10 years in prison on [tax evasion charges](#) that seem contrived not to punish financial crimes but silence a vital critical voice.

Read more: [Book: In the name of security - secrecy, surveillance and journalism](#)

Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo produced one of the most [impressive pieces of journalism of 2017](#), investigating the murder of ten Rohingya Muslim men with forensic attention to detail. They unearthed a series of photographs of the victims and their killers, and were able to piece together a detailed narrative so compelling that the authorities were forced to imprison the soldiers responsible for 10 years. For their work, the Reuters journalists were also arrested for violating the Official Secrets Act and sentenced to seven years. (A police officer testified in court that they framed the journalists.)

And The Capital Gazette? A few hours after a gunman burst into the newspaper's offices and murdered five staffers, one of its reporters, Chase Cook, tweeted: "I can tell you this. We are putting out a damn paper tomorrow". The paper did exactly that.

It was not producing the kind of work that might attract a murderous response. It is a local rag that covers council elections and school sports, not autocrats and genocide. And yet the press is now so demonised that a reader felt justified in shooting it up for its reporting of his own court case.

From the local to the global, these examples expose the way one of the most fundamental

pillars of a free, liberal society - journalism itself - is under assault.

The digital revolution is partly to blame. It has created a firehose of information that has enabled us to find “news” that confirms whatever we want to believe. In the process, it has eroded trust in the media and enabled anyone who squirms under its spotlight to dismiss it as “fake”. In the process, our capacity to hold informed, rational public debate has been dangerously undermined.

Make no mistake. This is a global crisis that strikes at the foundations of democracy, which is why Time’s decision is so timely and important.

Journalists are not without fault. News is a messy, imperfect human construct, and in the rush to create stories that stand out from the digital noise, standards have slipped. But the verbal and physical assaults on news agencies and their staff fail to acknowledge the professionalism that so many bring to their craft. The difference between fake news and the real thing is that good journalists acknowledge errors and correct them fast.

Read more: [*How investigative journalists are using social media to uncover the truth*](#)

The Time cover also demands a response. If we do nothing, we will end up heading further down a path that nobody but the authoritarians are happy with. Even in Australia, where national security laws have dramatically limited the ability of journalists to keep watch over government, the problems are acute and deteriorating. That is why a group of colleagues and I have set up the [Alliance for Journalists’ Freedom](#) to advocate for media freedom in the broadest sense - the ability to work free of unnecessarily restrictive laws, in a financial environment that supports independent quality news.

The questions are huge. How do we balance the democratic need for transparency and accountability, with the demands of national security? How do we pay for journalism that is

costly and necessary but not always commercially viable? How do we restore trust in an institution that underpins the way our society and our government works?

The AJF has partnered with the University of Queensland, where I am UNESCO Chair in Journalism and Communication, to work on research that tackles some of these most pressing problems.

If we do nothing, we can expect to see a lot more cases like Jamal Khashoggi, Maria Ressa, The Capital Gazette or Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo. I suspect that is a world few of us would relish.

Prof. Peter Greste is UNESCO Chair in Journalism and Communications at the University of Queensland. He is also a founding member and spokesman for the Alliance for Journalists Freedom.

Authors: Peter Greste, Professor of Journalism and Communications, The University of Queensland

Read more <http://theconversation.com/four-journalists-one-newspaper-time-magazines-person-of-the-year-recognises-the-global-assault-on-journalism-108669>