

Courageous Journalists

Losing their Lives to Report Injustices and Human Rights Violations

Introduction

Being a journalist, especially in countries where freedom of the press is not valued, is a risky and costly profession. If not killed outright, hundreds of reporters, editors, bloggers, and photojournalists worldwide suffer imprisonment and abuse for highlighting human rights abuses.

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), 71 had been slain worldwide in 2009, the deadliest year in over four decades! Until 2009, the previous record had been 67 journalists killed in 1967. To honor those who have given their lives in search of the truth, four courageous and inspirational reporters are featured as representative of the hundreds of women and men, from all cultures and countries across the globe, who have lost their lives reporting on social issues, injustices and human rights abuses.

Marlene Garcia-Esperat

March 24, 2005

Tacurong, Philippines

Columnist Marlene Garcia-Esperat was under police protection because of death threats following her reporting and commentary on corruption. However, she had released her guards for the Easter holi-



day when a gunman walked into her home and killed her in front of her family in 2005.

General Arturo Lomibao, Philippine National Police Chief, reported that the motive for her death was “work-related.” Charges against the accused masterminds were eventually dismissed, a step that was seen as “highly question-

able and suspicious” by the Esperat family lawyer.

Her case was the first of 56 murders of Filipino journalists since 1986 in which the perpetrators were identified, although not always brought to justice.

Garcia-Esperat began her efforts to expose corruption when she worked as ombudsman for the Department of Agriculture, when she discovered that her labo-

ratory was not receiving the funding it had been allocated. Inspired by her first husband, a journalist who was murdered, she accused officials of craft. She later spent two years in the witness protection program due to her ombudsman discoveries.



“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference, and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers.”

Universal Declaration of Human Rights

In 2001, Garcia-Esperat had hosted a program on a local radio station. A year later, she had initiated her column, “Madame Witness.”

Sheikh Nur Mohamed Abkey

May 4, 2010

Mogadishu, Somalia

Somalia is one of the most dangerous countries to work as a journalist. Nevertheless, warring factions in Mogadishu did not intimidate Sheikh Nur Mohamed Abkey, a researcher and staff trainer at state-run Radio Mogadishu. Due to security concerns, coworkers strongly encouraged him to live in the station; however, he refused to do so. That decision cost him his life.

In May 2010, three gunmen tortured and killed Abkey in an alleyway near his home in Mogadishu. Radio Mogadishu staff believe that

he was killed because of his affiliation with the government-run station. Threatening phone calls had been received and the Al-Shabaab insurgency claimed responsibility for Abkey’s murder.

Abkey, who left a wife and four children, began his career as a reporter in 1988. He later worked for several media agencies throughout Mogadishu.

Anna Politkovskaya

October 7, 2007

Moscow, Russia

Anna Politkovskaya was a journalist, author and human rights activist. Her subjects ranged from politics, to freedom of the press, to human rights, and social issues. Politkovskaya became internationally-known for her reporting about and opposition to the Chechen conflict and to then President of Russia Vladimir Putin.

Born Anna Mazeppa in New York City, her parents were Soviet Ukrainian and worked as diplomats at the United Nations. However, Politkovskaya spent most of her life in Russia, including her university education, her marriage, motherhood, and her award-winning career as a journalist.



In her reporting, she denounced corruption and abuse of power — reporting relentlessly on murders, kidnappings, and torture in Chechnya. This was unsettling to many, especially those in power. Yet, Politkovskaya did not shy away from personal risks, including death threats.

In October 2006, she was murdered in the elevator of her apartment building. Arrests have been made in connection with her murder, yet the one who ordered the killing has not been apprehended. Her case continues to attract international attention. She also has become a hero for those who see journalism as a high moral calling in fostering and maintaining a democratic society.

Christian Gregorio Poveda Ruiz

September 2, 2009

Tonacatepeque, El Salvador

A Frenchman of Spanish descent, Christian Gregorio Poveda Ruiz was a documentary filmmaker. He reported in Chile (under the Pinochet dictatorship), Nicaragua, and El Salvador, where he documented Salvadoran gangs.

Throughout 2008, Poveda Ruiz lived with gang members to film and produce a highly anticipated documentary on El Salvador's violent street gangs. In 2009, he was shot several times at close range. According to some reports,

he was killed by angry gang members who had previously threatened his life. Gang members may have murdered him believing that he was a police informer.



Condemning his death, Salvadoran President Mauricio Funes issued a statement calling for an end to street violence. Other journalists have also lost their lives trying to do in-depth reporting on the origins and causes of gang violence.

Conclusion

Thomas Jefferson so valued free expression that he said, "If it were left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter." Abraham Lincoln succinctly articulated the value of freedom of the press when he said: "Let the people know the facts, and the country will be safe."

The challenge is two-fold: holding the media to high standards and safe-guarding their lives as they perform a vital role in societies across the globe. Truth-seeking and truth-seekers need to be valued, protected, and sustained in today's world, more than ever.

Much of the material for "Courageous Journalists" was garnered from the [Committee to Protect Journalists](#). It was prepared by Mary Pat Hill, OSM, as a tribute to her father, Merle J. Hill, long-time reporter and editor at the *La Crosse Tribune*, whose motto was: "To find the truth and fearlessly print it."