As investigative reporting recedes in the United States, it is exploding around the world, often online and frequently in countries where it has never been seen before. Thurs., April 5, 2012.

By Mark Feldstein

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It was the most grisly murder of an investigative reporter in the nascent 21st century: 31-year-old Georgiy Gongadze, editor of Ukraine's first original news Web site, strangled and beheaded with an ax in September of 2000, his corpse burned and then buried in a forest outside Kyiv. Gongadze had started his online muckraking outlet only five months earlier. But in that brief time, his exposés of corruption by then-Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma and his family so enraged the autocrat that, according to a secretly recorded audiotape, Kuchma ordered his henchmen to take the cyberjournalist and "drive him out, undress him, fuck, leave him without his pants." (Kuchma has denied having anything to do with the crime and has suggested the tape was altered.) Gongadze's executioners were subsequently convicted of the assassination.

Last October, barely a mile from where the editor's murder was allegedly plotted, more than 500 investigative reporters from every continent descended on Kyiv determined to spread the kind of fearless crusading that cost Gongadze his life. Just as the 1976 slaying of Arizona reporter Don Bolles helped launch Investigative Reporters and Editors, the premier muckraking organization in the United States (see "Recalling the Arizona Project," August/September 2008), the assassinations of Gongadze and other foreign journalists have helped fuel the Global Investigative Journalism Network, which convened this fall in Ukraine, its sixth meeting since 2003. This growing international network of investigative reporters honors slain colleagues and provides assistance to journalists who face harassment or censorship around the world. It is also a platform for sharing ideas and tools to help journalists protect themselves from harm.

Muckraking Goes Global

From AJR, April/May 2012
The rise of watchdog journalism for the first time in dozens of authoritarian nations around the world.

"You can really talk about a global movement now for investigative reporting," says Sheila Coronel, a veteran journalist from the Philippines whose exposés of corruption by her country's president helped trigger massive street protests in Manila and his impeachment and jailing. Now a journalism professor at Columbia University, Coronel also trains other muckrakers from developing countries. "Investigative reporting associations and centers have sprouted all over the world," Coronel notes, and "teaching investigative reporting has been introduced in many, many places and has been much more vibrant than it has ever been before."

There’s no hard data to quantify the international proliferation of watchdog journalism. But it appears to be rooted in the significant political, economic and technological changes of the past generation. In particular, the fall of communism and of authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and Latin America – and the rise of globalization and digital communications – have led to what Coronel calls a “burst of investigative energies” in which “the media in many new democracies now poke their noses into areas of public life from which they had once been barred, exposing corruption [and] malfeasance in both high and low places.”

Such muckraking is expanding abroad even as it is increasingly jeopardized at home at the kinds of U.S. news outlets that invented it. "Kicked out, bought out or barely hanging on, investigative reporters are a vanishing species in the forests of dead tree media and missing in action on Action News," Mary Walton wrote in a major examination of the state of investigative reporting in the Fall 2010 issue of AJR. "I-Teams are shrinking or, more often, disappearing altogether."

Yet the very digital innovation that is decimating the economic foundation of watchdog reporting in the U.S. is helping fuel it overseas. "The new technology is exhilarating, and it’s enabling great journalism," says Charles Lewis, head of American University’s Investigative Reporting Workshop, who has been a leader of the global muckraking movement. In addition to the Internet, with its global reach for databases and cloud storage, modern muckrakers are using mobile and satellite phones as well as high-definition video and graphics, and they are exploring global positioning systems, radio frequency identification and even private drones to track investigative targets. "The new technology is cheaper and more portable than ever before," Lewis says, "and it’s now spreading everywhere."

In the Middle East, the "Facebook Revolution" famously helped galvanize protesters and topple aging dictators. But the Arab Spring has also breathed new life into a growing coterie of feisty young muckrakers in the region. Last year, the nonprofit group Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism reviewed 20 of the best recent investigative stories to come out of the Arab world, and it found that "the region’s media is now flourishing in areas where it was once considered impossible to report..."
Journalism produced the Middle East's first cross-border investigation, a three-part online series that tracked the wealth of a top crony of deposed Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. It also exposed widespread abuse of domestic workers in Bahrain – just one of some 150 investigations its members have produced since it began in 2005, according to Rana Sabbagh, the group's executive director.

Arab journalists have also recently probed government corruption in Tunisia, child abuse in Jordan, theft of Afghan foreign aid, neglect in Syrian nursing homes, pesticide poisoning in the Palestinian territories and cancer risks from depleted uranium weapons in Iraq. Cyberjournalist Hossam el-Hamalawy is using crowdsourcing to document human rights abuses by posting photos of Egyptian police officers online and soliciting witnesses and victims to identify their torturers.

These changes in the Middle East have been so dramatic that China has cracked down on reporters out of fear that the Arab Spring could spread east. Although Chinese authorities had already imprisoned more journalists and bloggers than any other country in the world, officials began "feverishly reinforcing its system of controlling news and information, carrying out extrajudicial arrests and stepping up Internet censorship," according to the international journalist advocacy group Reporters Without Borders.

Nevertheless, investigative reporting is quickly spreading in China, thanks to 195 million bloggers, 485 million Internet users and 1 billion mobile phone users. Century Weekly magazine, published online and in print by the aggressive Caixin Media company, recently revealed how China's one-child population control program led to the kidnapping and sale of peasant babies to families in Western countries, including the U.S. Cyberjournalist Deng Fei has exposed unregulated blood-selling that infected about a million people. Other Chinese journalists have uncovered corruption and mismanagement in the military, telecommunications and high-speed railway systems.

"Emerging online journalism has taken an active role in investigative reporting," says professor Zhan Jiang of Beijing Foreign Studies University. "The Internet is very important, because there is a huge demand in China for people to find out what the government is doing them."
Three months earlier, in another Chinese land dispute in which officials evicted family members from their home, three of them lit themselves on fire in protest. Photos of the horrific scene went viral. The ensuing outcry forced the government to fire the bureaucrats involved and launch criminal investigations.

How did these stories get past Chinese Internet censors, who are the most numerous and sophisticated in the world? Thanks to microblogs, known in Mandarin as "weibo," the Chinese equivalent of Twitter (which is blocked in China). "As a new communications tool, microblogs are real-time, high-speed, fragmented and highly difficult to censor," Ying Chan, founder of the Journalism and Media Studies Centre at the University of Hong Kong, posted after the land protests. They "can be sent from mobile phones or computers. ... [And] 140 characters in Chinese actually makes for much richer content than the same in English." Many Chinese have also become adept at using code words, jokes and slang to avoid online surveillance.

So popular are microblogs that one launched by one of Chan's colleagues had 1.7 million followers within just five months. "Some of those 1.7 million readers will share his posts with other people," Chan notes, "so this means that his broadcast power surpasses that of many newspapers." Two of China's most powerful microblogs are now crowdsourcing, asking followers to post photos of young street beggars to help families locate their abducted children.

The interactive nature of online journalism can strengthen the bond between cyber-muckrakers and the public, making reporters more accessible to receive story tips and readers more invested in supplying them. Crowdsourcing especially seems to be taking off all over the globe. In Panama, where corruption is rampant and citizens fear the police, a Web site called Mi Panama Transparente posted precise details from anonymous readers about the operations of a local criminal gang. Reporters from La Prensa, Panama's largest newspaper, verified the information and painted a vivid picture of what the gang did.

In Poland, the Gazeta Wyborcza newspaper solicited online reviews for a 2006 investigation of maternity hospitals; 40,000 readers responded. "People are ready to collaborate with the newspaper if you give them an important cause," Grzegorz Piechota, then special projects editor, said. And in Britain, the Guardian newspaper used crowdsourcing in 2009 to tackle the overwhelming task of combing through nearly half a million pages of expense account documents from members of Parliament. "Investigate your MP's expenses," the newspaper teased on its Web site. "Join us in digging—many hands can make light work." After reviewing each document, readers were invited to click one of four choices: "interesting," "not interesting," "interesting but known," and "investigate this!" By making the project fun, 56 percent of online visitors participated and reviewed 170,000 documents in just 80 hours.
Of course, technology can be a double-edged sword. The same digital innovations that have helped investigative journalists can also be used to spy on them and spread disinformation. Joel Simon, executive director of the Committee to Protect Journalists, fears that online media convergence is leading to an "information chokepoint" that will ultimately make it easier for repressive governments to censor the news. The global reach of the Internet also allows punitive lawsuits to be filed against troublesome reporters anywhere in the world; such "libel tourism" enables investigative targets to shop around for the most draconian dictatorships they can find in search of harsh legal judgments against their media critics. Web journalists are at special risk because they are more apt to be vulnerable freelancers without deep-pocketed media outlets to provide them with legal or financial help in times of trouble. Indeed, almost half of the 179 journalists imprisoned around the world worked online.

Online or off, few countries have been more dangerous for investigative reporters than Russia (see "Iron Curtain Redux," February/March 2007). At least 17 journalists have been murdered there during the past decade as a result of their work; dozens more have been exiled or kept out of the country. But because Internet service providers are owned privately, not by the state, some anti-government news sites have emerged as important checks on official power. Two of the most popular are run by lawyer Aleksei Navalny, whose exposés of political and corporate corruption have received as many as 1 million unique visitors a day. Navalny flamboyantly posts once-secret documents online and asks the public to help him spot impropriety. This crowdsourcing not only increases the chances of uncovering corruption; by drawing publicity to his Web sites, the strategy may help protect Navalny from official retaliation. So far, nearly $7 million worth of government contracts have been thrown out after the cyberjournalist and his followers raised questions about financial irregularities. Although authorities have launched a criminal investigation of Navalny, the digital muckraker remains defiant, publicly taunting his enemies.

In most Western countries, watchdog journalism is considerably less dangerous. Legal protections for the media vary but are generally predictable, and violence is rare. In developed countries, the biggest obstacles tend to be economic, especially in commercial media with declining corporate revenue. Some governments in northern European nations actually subsidize investigative journalism. In the U.S., nonprofit news outlets like ProPublica have risen to help make up for the shortfall. (See "The Nonprofit Explosion," Fall 2010.)

Africa, on the other hand, produces comparatively little investigative reporting. Poverty, illiteracy and repressive, unstable governments pose enormous challenges even to the most basic kinds of independent journalism. "Travel in Africa is difficult, and so is communication," explains South American Journalism Review.
African reporter Justin Arenstein, a founder of the nonprofit Forum for African Investigative Reporters. "But the Internet has been revolutionary. E-mail and texts allow small independent journalists on the ground to build a viable career. If it hadn't been for e-mail, we could not exist."

Despite all the hardships, FAIR members have produced well-researched online reports on human trafficking, Somali pirates and pharmaceutical profiteering. More dramatically, in Nigeria, where sexual violence is rarely prosecuted, a ghastly videotape of five men gang-raping a young woman was posted online; the images went viral and produced widespread public revulsion, identification of the rapists and their belated arrest.

In many Third World countries, the line between muckraking and political advocacy can be a fine one. Investigative journalists often operate as de facto members of the opposition in authoritarian societies, while mainstream news outlets frequently serve as propagandists for those wielding power. Journalistic neutrality in such circumstances can be almost impossible.

Many Arab journalists see their role as advocates for change, according to Lawrence Pintak, author of "The New Arab Journalist: Mission and Identity in a Time of Turmoil" and dean of the Washington State University college of communication.

Columbia's Sheila Coronel says the same is true in her native Philippines and other developing nations: "Where the media are suppressed, online writers uncover corruption in novel ways. They don't follow the journalistic canon like we do, with two sides of the story. But they're exposing the dark underside of society in ways that are evidence-based but also have a point of view."

Coronel argues that such engaged citizen journalism, "unencumbered by the ideology of professionalism," often has more impact than traditional news coverage.

And then there's WikiLeaks and a myriad of other sites that post secret documents and video online. These groups have played a role in making information available to traditional outlets, but their information is most often part of a larger story or a wider context.

In countries where access to information is restricted and probing questions can be dangerous, virtual newsrooms allow journalists to gather news from almost anywhere, minimizing their risk while maximizing their reach. "We're everywhere and we're nowhere," observes Brant Houston, a founder of the Global Investigative Journalism Network who is the Knight Chair in Investigative Reporting at the University of Illinois. Still, says David E. Kaplan, another pioneer in the international reporting movement, the impact of the Internet and other technological advances shouldn't be overstated. "The digital toolbox helps, but it's not driving the main engine. The main engine is the human."

The Internet, in short, is a tool that can be used in many ways. Whether it's for muckraking, political advocacy, or simply gathering information, the Internet is a powerful tool that can be used to good ends or for ill. The challenge for journalists and news organizations is to use the Internet in ways that promote accuracy, fairness, and transparency, and to navigate the complex ethical and legal issues that come with it.
engine is still the same: good old-fashioned muckraking with feet on the ground, painstakingly following money and people and holding power accountable."

For example, in El Salvador, a tiny news Web site called El Faro (The Beacon) recently solved the country’s most notorious crime: the 1980 murder of Archbishop Oscar Romero, which helped spark a 12-year civil war that led to the slaughter of 70,000 Salvadorans. In the spring of 2010, Web site Editor Carlos Dada patiently tracked down one of Romero’s killers and extracted an extraordinary confession that implicated the highest levels of the government in the archbishop’s assassination.

"With a limited budget, [the Beacon] has consistently published outstanding stories and projects—investigating long-ignored crimes and human rights abuses and now tracking growing drug violence throughout Central America," said the judges for a Maria Moors Cabot Prize for outstanding reporting on Latin America, which the site was awarded last fall. "El Faro has shown how digital media can overcome barriers of cost and tradition and offer honest journalism of high quality in a region where press standards are low and much of the media is highly partisan or even corrupt."

Such brave investigative reporting can now be found almost anywhere. In Armenia, after the government shut down an independent television station, Edik Baghdasaryan turned to the online newspaper Hetq (Trace) to reveal how the country’s environmental minister had handed out millions of dollars worth of mining licenses to his family and friends. Soon after, Baghdasaryan was ambushed at night and beaten up by three men; one of the attackers allegedly made multiple phone calls to the minister’s cellphone within hours of the assault. The target of Baghdasaryan’s reporting still wields power as a top government official, but Hetq, undaunted, continues to investigate wrongdoing by authorities.

To be sure, mainstream media outlets usually have more resources and greater impact. In Brazil, newspaper, television and online journalists recently collaborated to assemble a document database that helped expose systemic government corruption—embezzlement, money-laundering and massive hiring of ghost employees, including one man who had been dead for more than three years. In response, 30,000 citizens took to the streets to protest the graft. Authorities launched more than 20 criminal probes and arrested numerous legislative officials. The exposé was coordinated by the 2,000-member Brazilian Association of Investigative Journalism. More than 100 similar nonprofit centers promoting investigative reporting have now sprouted in every corner of the globe (see "A Nonprofit Investigative Explosion," page 48), and they are a crucial element of the global muckraking movement. "Most of these groups didn’t even exist 10 years ago, but they’re now an essential part of the investigative journalism landscape around the world."
exist five years ago,” Kaplan points out. “It’s unclear how many will survive, but they are dynamic agents of change, and they are making a big contribution.”

A majority of these nonprofits have their own Web sites, some translated into multiple languages, filled with practical investigative advice, links for networking with other journalists and applications for obtaining grants. Many post original investigative stories that otherwise would not be circulated in their countries’ more restrictive print or broadcast media. “The work is priceless,” says Robin Heller, development director for the Center for Public Integrity in Washington, D.C., one of the first such investigative nonprofits, “but it isn’t free.” Funding comes from foundations, mainstream news outlets, individual donors, Western aid agencies, the World Bank and the United Nations.

Among the most exciting muckraking ventures now taking place are cross-border collaborations among investigative reporters (see “Playing Defense,” Summer 2010). For example, journalists from Armenia, the Baltics, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Hungary, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Russia, Serbia and Ukraine pooled their efforts into a nonprofit group called the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, whose Web site hosts their exposés on transnational smuggling, money laundering, political corruption, identity theft and tax fraud. This “offshore journalism,” Kyiv Post reporter Vlad Lavrov wrote last year, “is how I was able to publish several stories that otherwise I would not have been able to get to readers in Ukraine.”

More ambitious still is the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, a network of more than 160 muckrakers from 61 countries around the world. In the past 15 years, the group has probed multinational tobacco companies, water privatization, corporate mercenaries, misuse of foreign aid and the international asbestos trade, winning worldwide attention and prestigious awards. “Local journalists have the knowledge and access to our complex,” says Deputy Director Marina Walker Guevara, a journalist from Argentina who works out of the ICIJ’s Washington office. “No parachuting American reporters can make up for the work of local journalists who know the territory, who understand the local culture.”

Guevara and the ICIJ staff, as well as libel lawyers, carefully fact-check their reporters’ work, which is sent by encrypted e-mail to protect sources and sensitive information. “The ability to share information instantly, to comb through databases, to edit and shoot stories online, makes a virtual global newsroom possible that wasn’t there before the Internet age,” marvels Bill Buzenberg, executive director of the Center for Public Integrity, which created the ICIJ. “The bad guys have organized globally, and the media has to be organized the same way or we don’t have a check on them.”
In the same way that crime and corruption cross international borders, so, too, must the journalism that exposes it. The era of global muckraking is at hand.