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.

BY MARK FELDSTEIN

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 exposé 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 cyber-journalist 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. Kuchma was not.

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 reporting tips, contacts, data training and awards for its members. More important, it symbolizes 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 exposé 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. "Teams are shrinking or, more often, disappearing altogether."
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 to the industry are 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, whose Charles Lewis runs, have done well in commercial media with declining corporate revenue. The U.S. has been a leader of the global muckraking movement. In addition to the Internet, with its global reach for databases and as a platform for sharing multimedia content, 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 cohort of feisty young muckrakers in the region. Last year, the nonprofit group Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism produced the Middle East’s first cross-border investigation, a three-part online series that tracked the wealth of a top crown prince of Egypt President Hosni Mubarak. It also exposed weapons used by indicted civilians in Bahrain. After the Gulf arab Spring, some 150 investigations its members have produced since it began in 2005, according to Iara Saffagh, 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 Hosam 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 will spread to the east. Although Chinese authorities had already imprisoned more journalists and bloggers than any other country in the world, officials began “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. The media are more open, and “China’s 485 million smartphone users and 1 billion mobile phone users,” the China Daily reports, have launched a criminal investigation of Navalny, the digital muckraker remains defiant, publicly taunting his enemies.

investigative reporting is quickly spreading in China, thanks to 195 million smartphone users and 1 billion mobile phone users.

“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, but it claims to be a forum for all, and youth has emerged as a huge force in China. So people try to climb over the wall to get information.”

In 2010, Chinese village Qian Yuhui was run over by a truck after he objects to a land grab by provincial authorities. In the end, the photos of his death were posted online and quickly received 400,000 hits before censors could remove them from the Web. Cyber-muckrakers rushed to the village and soon reported a lawsuit that did not go far. Two unconfirmed officials physically held Yuhui on the ground while the truck slowly drove over him.

Three months earlier, in another Chinese land dispute in which a company had evicted some residents, two 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, professor of communication at the Asia Research Center 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.

Popular are microblogs that one launched by one of China’s colleagues had 1.7 million followers within just five months. “Some of those 1.7 million users will share his posts with other users,” Chan notes, “so that means his broadcast power surpasses that of many newspapers.” Two of China’s most powerful microbloggers 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 enabled China's online bloggers, users and 1 billion mobile phone users. Century Weekly maga- zine, published online and in print by the aggressive Caixin Media company, recently revealed how China’s one-child popula- tion control program led to the kidnapping and sale of pro- spective babies to families in Western countries, including the U.S. Cyberjournalist Deng Fei has exposed unregulated blood-sell- ing in a county run by a local official. Other Chinese journalists have uncovered corruption and mismanagement in the military, telecommunications and high-speed railway systems...."
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 judge 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 human journalists a 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 arrested at a night club. One of the attackers allegedly made multiple phone calls to the address in question hours of the assault. The-U.S.-based Target of Baghdrasaryan’s reporting still wielded power as a top government official, but Hetq, undaunted, continues to investi- gate 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—embezzle- ment, 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 legisla- tive officials.

The exposed was coordinated by the 3,000-member Brazilian Association of Investigative Journalism. More than 100 simi- lar nonprofit centers promoting investigative reporting have now sprouted in every corner of the globe (see “A Nonprofit Investigative 48

Muckraking Goes Global

A NONPROFIT INVESTIGATIVE EXPLOSION

More than 100 nonprofit online investigative reporting centers and associations have sprouted up, most in the past few years. Many of them operate under the umbrella of the Global Investigative Journalism Network (www.gijn.org). Among them:

- Abajo! – Brazilian Association of Investigative Journalism (www.abajo.org.br)
- Arab Network for Investigative Journalism (ANII) (www.anii.net/en)
- Armenia HETQ (www.hetq.am/en)
- Associação de Jornalismo Investigativo (AJI) (www.jornalismoinvestigativo.org.br)
- Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) (www.birn.eu.com)
- Baltic Center for Investigative Reporting (BCIR) (www.balticcenter.org)
- Bosnian Center for Investigative Reporting (CNI) (www.bosnia24.com/articles/16381)
- Borodin Trends Training Center ProMedia (www.borodin.org)
- Bulgarian Investigative Journalism Center (www.bijc.eu)
- Cambodian Media Investigations Center (www.cmidcenter.org/about.html)
- Center for Investigative Journalism, Nepal (www.centerforinvestigation.com.np)
- Center for Public Integrity (www.publicintegrity.org)
- Center for Investigative Journalism UK (www.cij.org.uk)
- Children Center for Investigative Journalism and Informing Society (SEJ) (www.childrensej.org)
- Consejo de Redacción (www.consejoderедакción.org)
- DOJ – Dutch- Flemish Association for Investigation (www.dojflra.com)
- EJC – European Journalism Centre (www.ejc.net)
- EU Fund for LJ (www.europeanjournalismfund.eu)
- Forum for African Investigative Reporters (www.fairreporters.org)
- Free Media Movement of Sri Lanka (www.fmmsrilanka.wordpress.com)
- Freedom of Information Center, US (www.foic.org/us-center)
- Fund for Investigative Journalism (www.fij.org)
- Grön–Grönvänd Journalet, Sweden (www.fgg.se)
- Institute for War and Peac (www.iwpr.net)
- IPYS – Instituto Prensa y Soledad (www.ipys.org)
- Institute for Journalists of South Africa (IJSA) (IJSA.print@joes.co.za)
- International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) (www.publicintegrity.org)
- Investigative Journalism Education (www.ijee.org)
- International Media Support (IMS) (www.bijc.eu)
- Istanbul Journalism (IJ)
- Macedonian Association of Journalists (www.mandames.info)
- Media Focus (www.medialens.org)
- Mediatorcentar Sarajevo (www.mediacentar-sarajevo.org)
- NetMedia – Digital Media & Research net-media.co.uk
- Network Recherche (www.networkrecherche.de/)
- OCICP (www.reportingproject.org/iijn)

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In countries where access to information is restricted and probing questions are dangerous, virtual newsmakers allow- journalist 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’s freedom and technology’s reach is already starting to make the world an even smaller place.

For example, in El Salvador, a tiny news Web site called El Faro (The Beacon) recently solved the country’s most notorious