



SYDNEY

PEN magazine

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Turkish Kurdish writer takes reins at PEN International

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Committed to banishing hate speech, surveying surveillance and working for climate change



Like many others, I have stayed at home as Australia put up its fortress forbidding exit or entry to our great southern land. What I have had that our ancestors during the Spanish flu did not is the miracle of a digitally connected globe. As Chair of the PEN International Women Writers Committee I have

led several meetings with members clicking in from their lounge rooms and kitchens from every inhabited continent. Time-zones have been unkind to me as I sway to the reality that the majority of PEN's members are best served by meetings scheduled in the wee hours of Sydney's mornings.

At our committee meetings we have heard from members about what is happening in different places – where in the shadow of a pandemic and the health measures implemented to stem its awesome path, authoritarian regimes have sought to silence dissenting voices. We have all watched with great alarm at the unfolding tragedy of the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan and hold grave fears for writers and other civil society activists, particularly women, who are targets of this cruel regime. While it is not as good as meeting in person, meeting virtually and discussing these issues has been incredibly moving, and even intimate as we see the living spaces of our dear colleagues, usually met in anonymous hotels and conference rooms.

Like every year, PEN International held elections at its Congress in September. There were three very high calibre candidates for the presidency of PEN International in this centennial Congress, with Burhan Sönmez, the Kurdish Turkish novelist, poet and human rights lawyer winning the support of a healthy majority of PEN delegates. Similarly, Thida of PEN Myanmar, a previous PEN case and a tireless champion of freedom of expression and civil rights was elected Chair of PEN International's Writers in Prison Committee, which for many is PEN's *raison d'être*. Salil Tripathi, currently resident in the US and the former Writers in Prison Committee Chair, Ola Larsmo of PEN Sweden and Gabriel Seisdedos of PEN Chile were elected regular members of the Board. (I reflect that this does show

diversity by geography, but definitely not gender). Long-term PEN Trieste member Antonio Della Rocca was elected the Chair of the Search Committee which oversees the electoral processes for PEN International, with Basque PEN member Urtzi Urrutikoetxea elected Chair of the Translation and Linguistic Rights Committee. I was re-elected the Chair of PEN International's Women Writers Committee.

The excitement for PEN International under Burhan Sönmez' leadership is a commitment to continue the work of PEN in supporting writers in prison and at risk, coupled with a commitment to PEN's future, seeking to address three key concerns for writers: hate speech, surveillance and climate change; and to establish a Tomorrow Club for a younger generation of writers to be courted by PEN and celebrated and to carry on our noble organisation for another 100 years.

Finally, as well as taking an active role in International PEN's Women Writers' Committee, Sydney PEN has embarked on an exciting, post Covid lockdown program to draw attention to the work of emerging writers, some of whom appear in our special event at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, refugee writers, as in the case of Behrouz Boochani, and persecuted writers, as in the case of Turkish Kurdish writer Ilhan Sami Çomak who has languished in a Turkish gaol for 28 years. He is currently occupying Sydney PEN's Empty Chair. We present this work during the 2021 Day of the Imprisoned Writer with the event at the MCA featuring six emerging writers who have written special pieces for the occasion. This is followed by an address at the State Library by Dr Mehreen Faruqi who has just published her memoir, an account of her determination to make this country a fairer place to live, described as the quintessential migrant manifesto.

Zoë Rodriguez
Joint President

■ President elected

Turkish Kurdish writer and human rights lawyer takes the reins at PEN International

Award-winning novelist and human rights lawyer Burhan Sönmez is the newly elected President of PEN International as Mexican-American writer Jennifer Clement, the first woman President to lead the organization, stepped down at PEN's Centenary Congress.

Born in a small village in central Turkey in 1965, Sönmez grew up speaking Kurdish at a time when the Kurdish language was stigmatised and officially banned in education, then he was taught Turkish at school. He moved to Istanbul to study law and despite constant harassment by the authorities, he managed to graduate after seven years and started work as a lawyer in Istanbul. He joined the Human Rights Society and the Progressive Lawyers Association.

His law office was broken into by secret police several times because of his involvement with human rights cases. He suffered a brutal police attack and was left on the street, presumed dead.

It was the mid-1990s, the peak time of the Kurdish civil war that claimed lives of many lawyers, journalists and academics, and Sönmez was one of the few lucky people who survived a murder attempt, though seriously wounded. He underwent surgical operations in Turkey and Germany. Because of continuing harassment, he ended up going to exile in Britain where he received long-term treatment with the help of Freedom from Torture Centre in London.

He founded the Foundation for Social Research, Culture and Art. Even though he was interested in poetry and had won two awards for his poetry in Turkey, he turned his hand to writing novels in exile. His interest in writing is rooted in the traditional stories he was brought up with. His unique experience of growing up in a remote village with no electricity, and having a talented storyteller for a mother, has provided inspiration and material for his writing.

He is the author of five novels: *North* (2009), *Sins & Innocents* (2011), *Istanbul Istanbul* (2015), *Labyrinth* (2018), *Stone & Shadow* (published this year). His novels have been translated into 42 languages.

"While the whole world grapples with the Covid-19 epidemic, another epidemic called authoritarianism has been spreading. Freedom of expression and human creativity are under grievous attack. Today PEN is needed more than ever," he says.



Burhan Sönmez

"This pandemic has shown us new possibilities about how to establish a global network of PEN centres in the regions, especially in the global south. With the accumulation of our century-old history we can promote the role of writers better and provide effective support to those who need our help.

"We have to continue our journey with the hope and determination of our founders. Hope is not a promise, it either exists or does not exist. Together, in the face of enormous challenges, we are a great family of hope. I will be honoured to serve this family as its president and to work with you all on this path," he says.

Burhan Sonmez was lecturer in Literature and Novel at the Middle East Technical University, Ankara, a member of the judging panel for the 2014 Cevdet Kudret Literature Prize and for the 2020 Geneva International Film Festival. He is a member of English PEN, Kurdish PEN and PEN Turkey, and a former member of the board of directors of PEN International.

Incarceration turns

This interview was conducted by researcher and curator Ginerva Avalor, who is PEN International's Archives Collection Manager, in Oxford in 2019.

GINERVA AVALOR: What is your experience as a writer in the context of Turkey, and what pushed you to take the role you have now at PEN International?

BURHAN SÖNMEZ: I had two reasons; both came at the same time. My books started to be translated into other languages several years ago. Around the same time, the political situation in Turkey took a new shade of darkness. The government started a new policy towards intellectuals, writers, journalists and academics. I was in Turkey at the time, just returned from exile in Britain. There were those two developments in my life, becoming an internationally published writer and also getting involved with the newly emerged oppression style of the government on journalists, academics, and writers.

AVALOR: You also experienced prison. When did this happen and how did it influence you?

SÖNMEZ: It happened before I was a writer. I was arrested after the military coup when I was a student in 1984. It was a famous era of systematic torture. I became a lawyer, and I was arrested again. And then in 1996 I was assaulted by the police with the intention of killing me. They left me for dead. I was heavily wounded. My life changed after that point. I had to go through some medical operations, because I had brain trauma and fractures in my face, and head. The consequences of brain trauma included insomnia, migraines, etc. I ended up having treatments in other countries like Switzerland, Germany and finally in Britain. I arrived in London in 1998 and received medical help from an independent foundation, that used to be called the Medical Foundation. Now they've changed their name to Freedom from Torture. They provide free treatment for the victims of torture.

AVALOR: Were you expecting the assault?

SÖNMEZ: Yes.

AVALOR: Can I ask you why?

SÖNMEZ: Because of the time in Turkey. The first half of the 1990s, if you ask me, was the worst period of Turkish history. It was the peak of the Kurdish Civil War. When there's a civil war, you can understand the killing by security forces of opposing militants. But around that time, 17,000 civilians were killed by unknown

people, mostly security forces and paramilitaries. It was a difficult time, especially being a lawyer of human rights as I was. That means you are an enemy of the state. My office had been targeted a couple of times. Those kinds of harassment were normal things; when you live in the hot water you don't realise how hot it is. I lost many friends... including lawyer friends who were shot by the police. I lost friends from other universities, who were murdered, and the police released their names as terrorists-runaways. Of course, we knew it was not true. I survived. I was one of the few lucky people who survived a murder attempt.

AVALOR: Can you tell me about the cell?

SÖNMEZ: This is the story of my third novel. It is called *Istanbul Istanbul*. It is the story of four people, in a small cell, three floors underground in Istanbul. They are continuously being tortured. When they are left alone in their cells, they need something to pass the time. They start to tell stories to each other, beautiful stories, humorous stories, obscene stories, just for fun. Of course, all the stories are about Istanbul. So, I combined people who are in pain and are telling beautiful stories of Istanbul. I got inspiration from my personal experience. I was in a cell, similar to the one I described in my novel. I was the youngest one, there were other people. Sometimes we were six, sometimes eight people. That experience became my main source of inspiration when I wrote that book about Istanbul.

AVALOR: How many assaults did you face in your life?

SÖNMEZ: The first assault happened while I was a university student. About 10 years later I was taken there again, when I was a lawyer. Apparently I was in that torture centre some other time, too, but I don't remember that. When I was interrogated there, when I was a lawyer, they told me that I was there four years ago, in 1989, again. But I don't remember that. It was my last year at the university and there were operations against students. They brought some papers to show me their record that I was there for some weeks. I still don't understand; either I lost my memory of that time in torture centre or they were lying to me, but why?

AVALOR: How did you manage to leave Turkey after the assault?

SÖNMEZ: When I became a lawyer, my application

lawyer to novelist

for a passport was rejected. It took me two years to get it. Then I was able to travel. I had been invited to conferences about human rights and law around Europe. Around the same time there were some court cases against me. As I left Turkey one of the court cases resulted with the sentence to six months imprisonment. The reason for the case was that I supported a statement that criticised the security forces for mistreating and mutilating the corpses of militants they murdered.

AVALLE: So the first treatments were in Turkey?

SÖNMEZ: Yes, in Turkey, then Germany, Switzerland and finally Britain.

AVALLE: What drove you to become a lawyer?

SÖNMEZ: You had to get a nationwide exam to be able to study at the university. Before the exam you were supposed to make 18 choices. Then your exam result might get a place for you in the list of your choices. Istanbul Law Faculty was my fifth on the list.

AVALLE: When did you join PEN International?

SÖNMEZ: In 2009 I published my first novel. Then I joined PEN. The people who put me in PEN were Eugene Schoulgin and Moris Farhi. Moris recently passed away; he was the Vice-President of PEN International and also the Chair of the Writers in Prison Committee. After I published my first novel, he told me I should get involved with PEN. I always thought of PEN with a high literary level. I was just a simple new writer. I didn't think they would need someone like me. But after the encouragement by Moris and Eugene, I started.

AVALLE: Let's talk about your biography now.

SÖNMEZ: I was born in a small village in Turkey, I come from Kurdish origin.

AVALLE: Do you visit it often?

SÖNMEZ: Yes, every year. My family is there, the whole big family.

AVALLE: Are you still having problems with the Turkish authorities?

SÖNMEZ: They send you messages and threats, things like "You are number 57 on the death list". When I got this particular message I felt a bit offended. Why 57, and not a smaller number for me? Once you are targeted, you are always a target. They use your name; they send you messages continuously. They try to say two things. First, you should know that we watch you and secondly, we are watching you very seriously. In a country like Turkey, the only way to overcome that kind of problem is to speak against it openly and directly. Because you should make it clear that you don't do anything wrong, anything illegal.

You just do something ordinary, defending people's rights, defending freedom of expression, justice... you know that kind of terms are often too radical for the politicians. If they call that kind of term "radical", it means they are the radical ones. You are normal. We have to defend these normal definitions.

AVALLE: What happens to the people who are arrested?

SÖNMEZ: When this government came to power 17 years ago, the total number of people in prison was 70,000. Now only the number of students in prison is 70,000. The total number is 250,000 people in prison. President Erdogan, in the last couple of years, has been promising, when visiting cities: "We are going to build a new prison for your city, don't worry. Your government is working for you".

AVALLE: What do you think will happen?

SÖNMEZ: There are a couple of things that might happen. The first thing is that the economic situation is getting dramatically worse. The greatest success of Erdogan is that he managed to cut the logical relation between economic problems and government's policies. If people are getting poorer and poorer, they don't see any responsibility of the government. In the last 10-15 years there has been an ideological shift that the government managed. For example, if the Turkish Lira is losing value, the government says it is a plot organised by evil Western powers against our nation.

AVALLE: How did you start being a novelist?

SÖNMEZ: I was a simple lawyer and then the police came to kill me. I got wounded, I couldn't move, couldn't sleep, couldn't go out. I was suicidal. I started to write. Without any intention. I lost my ability to read after the assault. My brain was blocked. It was a condition for a person to die. I started to write stories. I was a refugee in Britain. I was ill, I had no money, I could speak no English. I had spent all my money for travels and surgeries around Europe. Who saved me? People like me. There were organisations helping refugees in need. Thanks to them they sent me to a school to learn English. They sent me to doctors, provided assistance. Without them, I couldn't have survived. After 10 years, I became a novelist and also a healthy man. Now, what could I do for people? For writers in need? For others like me?

AVALLE: When you think about your experience, what are the three words that come to your mind?

SÖNMEZ: That is a game I used in my second novel, *Sins & Innocents*, called a three-word game. I would say: solidarity, hope and dream.

Poetry is pure expression

No topic is out of bounds in poetry, it is one of the most diverse categories of literature, reports **Sandra Symons**.

From personal experience, social and political justice, historical events to music and sexuality, poetry describes what it is to be human. It demonstrates freedom of expression through words, phrases, lines.

As Grace Tame, 2021 Poetry Month Ambassador, says, “Poetry is pure expression. It’s an infinite canvas for linguistic creativity. It can be structured or completely unstructured. The parameters are the prerogative of the poet and that’s what makes it so beautiful.”

Poetry Month, celebrated from August 1 to 31, was a new initiative presented by Red Room Poetry to celebrate Australian poetry, poets and publishers. The goal was to increase access, awareness, value and visibility of poetry in all its forms and for all audiences. This inaugural event aims to present an ongoing annual celebration.

The 2021 program featured an impressive line-up of poetic collaborations, daily poems and writing prompts, online workshops, poetic residencies and live to live-streamed showcases, designed to engage everyone, from veteran poetry lovers to the uninitiated.

As Tamryn Bennett, Artistic Director of Red Room, says, mathematics may be the language of the cosmos but it’s poetry that helps explain the equations of emotion that carry us to ‘the other side of the universe’. Poetry reaches across communities and speaks through smoke and fences, in the aftermath of loss, in the midst of panic and throughout distanced days.

“That’s why, in 2020, we paid and supported more than 200 poets nationally to write our way through to the other side, delivering 30+ digital events and engaging audiences of 4.3 million through publications, audio, video, public art installations and workshops,” she says, adding that the Red Room mission was fortified by the inaugural Poetry Month and Poem Forest, a student writing prize that planted a tree at the Australian Botanic Garden Mount Annan for every nature poem received.

“More than ever we need poetic voices in the fabric of Australian arts and culture to connect us to community, authentic storytelling and the imagination needed to reshape our future,” she says.

A poet and artist, Dr Bennett has published two poetry collections, *Phosphene* (Rabbit Poet Series), and

Icaros (forthcoming from Vagabond). She is the editor of *Líneas en tierra / Lines in land*, a bilingual collection of Mexican poems published by Australian Poetry. She is a recipient of the Marten Bequest Travelling Scholarship and Australia Council Professional Development Grant.

She says Poetry Month grew from conversations among members of the Australian literary world who recognised the need to reinforce poetry’s place in Australian culture. She believes poetry has lacked visibility here, noting that the United States and New Zealand have poetry laureates and major platforms that raise public awareness of poetry.

“I feel passionate about participatory voices, inclusive of any age, any where, that share poetry.”

According to acclaimed poet Sarah Holland-Batt, who believes Poetry Month was long overdue, “Poetry changes lives. In Australia, we have been slow to acknowledge or champion this fact. We have no poet laureate, and rarely is poetry publicly celebrated, even by those who otherwise champion the arts.”

Dr Holland-Batt, poet, critic, and Associate Professor of Creative Writing and Literary Studies at Queensland University of Technology, has been appointed the 2021 Judy Harris Writer in Residence at the University of Sydney, the first poet to undertake the residency.

“A poem can let a listener or reader into a charged moment, they can feel as though they’re hearing someone’s intimate thoughts or experiences. “A poem is something you can read in one sitting – and it’s an immersive experience,” she says. “A poem can provide a moment of calm contemplation, a little escape. And it can bring you into closer contact with the lives of others—including those whose experiences may initially seem distant from your own.”

Roger Housden, author of the international best seller *Ten Poems to Change Your Life*, says great poetry has the power to start a fire in a person’s life. It can alter the way we see ourselves, he says.

“It can change the way we see the world. You may never have read a poem in your life, and yet you can pick up a volume of Mary Oliver say, or Neruda, or of Rumi, open it to any page, and suddenly find yourself blown into a world full of awe, dread, wonder, marvel, deep sorrow, and joy.



Poetry Ambassadors: writer and award-winning social advocate, Yassmin Abdel-Magied, science commentator and author Dr Karl Kruszelnicki, and 2021 Australian of the Year, Grace Tame. Picture: Red Room

“Poetry at its best calls forth our deep being. It dares us to break free from the safe strategies of the cautious mind. It is a magical art, and always has been — a making of language spells designed to open our eyes, open our doors and welcome us into a bigger world, one of possibilities we may never have dared to dream of.”

The inaugural Poetry Month featured workshops, showcases and events plus new works from an array of diverse talent – writers, poets, artists and public figures – including Omar Sakr, Grace Tame, Dr Karl, Maxine Beneba Clarke, Yassmin Abel Magied, Sarah Holland-Batt and Evie Wyld. It included:

- 30in30, an original poetry commission published daily online (text and video), plus a daily writing prompt, and personal reflections on what poetry means to artists including PiO, Laura Jean McKay, Anna Spargo Ryan, Maddie Godfrey, Krissy Kneen, John Kinsella, Bala Luke (Luke Currie-Richardson), Walter Kadiki, Laurie May, Peter Goldsworthy, Thuy On, Mary Anne Butler.
- Poetry Ambassadors, public figures such as science commentator Dr Karl, award-winning social advocate Yassmin Abdel-Magied, and 2021 Australian of the Year Grace Tame who share a deep love of poetry and advocated for the art form during Poetry Month.
- Fair Trade, an international First Nations poetic exchange resulting in six co-written original poems and video readings and an online Fair Trade

showcase. Artists included Ali Cobby Eckermann and Joy Harjo (USA); Tony Birch and Simon Ortiz (USA); Natalie Harkin and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Canada); Evelyn Araluen and Anahera Gildea (NZ); Ellen van Neerven and Layli Long Soldier (USA); Samuel Wagan and Watson and Sigbjørn Skåden (Norway).

- The Poem Forest, in conjunction with Mt Annan Botanic Garden, where for every nature poem received, a tree was planted to help heal habitats and create a Poem Forest for future generations.
- Workshops, weekly online poetry workshops designed for poets at all stages. Wednesdays featured Emerging Older Voices with Sarah Temporal; Where Poetry Meets Beatbox with Hope One; Srsly?! Comedy and Poetry with Vidya Rajan; Everything is Everything with Tony Birch

Red Room Poetry (RR) is Australia’s leading organisation for commissioning, creating, publishing and promoting poetry in meaningful ways. Poetry Month was produced by Anne-Marie Te Whiu and David Stavanger.

Refugee Ellie describes her harrowing Nauru experience

In her diary entry, 34-year-old Iranian refugee Ellie* describes her harrowing experience of being forcibly imprisoned in the offshore detention regime on Nauru. Translated from Persian by Saba Vasefi for Red Room Poetry.

While Australia is going to celebrate Refugee Week, it will be just another week of incarceration in the Australian detention regime for me. I am still enduring eight years of terror and dehumanisation and am surviving only through my own resilience. The regime has stripped me of my identity. But I'm still enthusiastic to protect and respect my existence as a human.

I am terrified that my lawyer and immigration caseworker keep advising me that my whole life and freedom is in the hands of one man, the immigration minister. It is profoundly disappointing for me that the immigration caseworker tells me that my health is not her concern.

Australia is punishing me for escaping from violence, and sexual and physical assault. I am suffering intensely from lack of safety and security. Nothing can make me happy. But also, there is nothing that can any longer keep me silent in prison. After eight years of indefinite imprisonment without any crime, I still hope for freedom, and I will fight for my hope and for my voice to be heard.

I am surrounded among men who were rapists, children, and women abusers. Every day, I sink deeper into the swamp of fear and despair. I want to shout from the bottom of my heart to the people who played with my youth, life and future. But no one hears me or sees me struggling alone in my bag of sorrow and suffering. I have fallen into a deep black hole and no matter how much I shout and ask for help, no one hears me. They do not want to hear me and pass by indifferently. I am mentally and physically fed up.

Imprisoning a defenceless asylum seeker woman for eight years without any criminal record is nothing new and has been talked about a lot. But I want to tell you that the Australian Government is also punishing a harmless and defenceless woman who has been repeatedly physically and sexually abused, and harangued with verbal and physical harassment, and vigorous constraints.

My dozen complaints about guards breaching my



Refugee Ellie*

privacy by invading my room and patting me down did not go anywhere. Rather, Serco punished me by reducing my weekly points, which are used to buy essential products from the detention shop. They have done this because I resisted their incessant demands to search my body and room.

The series of rigorous punishments I have experienced at the hands of this detention regime cannot be compensated with any money. Because how will a judge be able to see the wounds of my soul to determine compensation for it? What compensation can restore my stolen youth? What compensation can erase all the grief caused by recurring memories of the dark and atrocious experiences I've endured while in detention? What court is able to deeply understand my physical pain and illness, which have not yet been cured after even eight years? Is it fair to keep a lonely and defenceless woman in an environment surrounded by men who have a record of child abuse?

I never forget when I was in Christmas Island Detention Centre how I was forcibly lifted from a hospital bed and flown to the terrible island of Nauru without my consent and despite my medical problems.

I do not feel safe at all. The gaze of lustful and treacherous men and criminals and aggressors surrounds me in detention. I am extremely distressed and fearful that the normal rules of behaviour and laws that apply to men's treatment of women do not apply to me; they can harass me, and it goes unpunished.

I live in fear and apprehension. I am suffering from severe insomnia. Whenever I manage to fall asleep, the officers cause me stress and apprehension by knocking their boots on the floor and packing tightly into my room for daily counting and inspection.

Despite my request, instead of sending a female officer for my daily census, male officers entered my room, which made me feel anxious and insecure. The census is done 4 times a day. They do not respect my privacy and they violate it: even when I sleep, I can no longer wear comfortable clothes for fear of being woken.

The officers always come into my room with their dirty boots; they do not respect my privacy. Although I have complained and asked them to stop many times and have even posted notes on the door of my room, they still deliberately enter like this to harass me.

Most officers in the workplace write daily reports about the detainees every hour, 24 hours a day, recording even our simple act. Some officers write inaccurate reports about people, and when the incident is investigated and ABF finds the report is not accurate, they never apologize. If the officers misbehave, they are supported. But if one of the refugees makes a mistake, not only will seven points be deducted from our ten points for shopping, but in addition, we will be threatened and punished.

Even a crumpled paper can be recycled and be useful. But why does the Australian government set out to destroy all of a refugee's capabilities and potential?

Ellie is a 34-year-old Iranian refugee who has been imprisoned for six years in offshore detention regime on Nauru. The family violence and gendered based violence led her to flee Iran by herself in 2013. She is the last remaining female refugee to be medically evacuated from Nauru to Melbourne detention centre and for more than 21 months is still locked in detention in 2021.*

More than 100 Australian-based academic researchers and experts in migration, refugee studies, and refugee law and policy, signed an open letter to the minister of home affairs expressing their concern about the effects of closed immigration detention on female refugees and asylum seekers in Australia, the group has urgent concerns about Ellie's welfare.

Nginha-gulia nyiang – These words

These words cry out and I hear them – learn to mould and shape them like clay.

There should have been a time for such words.
for this word – 'Nginha Nyiang'
And a word for such time Guwayu

How clunky these are as I first stumble over them.
Grappling like the child I should have been when I
first
felt them – 'Winungah Dilinyi', Sang them – 'Babiyi',
Spoke them – 'yayi'

Now my clumsy tongue struggles over each new
syllable my Country 'Ngurumbang' gives me.

Each one I want to devour like the sweetest thing
'Wiluray Bang Gula-dhayi' I ever tasted.
I want to suck every shred of the marrow
'Dundumbirra' from each solid sound.
I want to swallow it whole 'Darra-Marra'
to know what it is to eat for the first time
I want to feel like the child born to these words
'Gudha Dhurrinya Nginha Nyiang'.

Jeanine Leane

Wiradjuri interpretation provided by Aunty Elaine Lomas



Picture: Red Room

Jeanine Leane is a Wiradjuri writer, poet and academic from south-west New South Wales. Her first volume of poetry, *Dark Secrets After Dreaming: A.D. 1887–1961* (Presspress, 2010) won the 2010 Scanlon Prize for Indigenous Poetry and her first novel, *Purple Threads* (UQP), won the David Unaipon Award for an unpublished Indigenous writer in 2010. In 2019 Jeanine was the recipient of the Red Room Poetry Fellowship. She has published widely in the area of Aboriginal literature, writing otherness and creative non-fiction poetry and prose. Jeanine is the recipient of an Australia Research Council grant on Aboriginal literature: Aboriginal Writing: Shaping the literary and cultural history of Australia, since 1988. She teaches creative writing and Aboriginal literature at the University of Melbourne.

When a great story teller loses his memory

Rodrigo García's new memoir, *A Farewell to Gabo and Mercedes*, recounts the ailing health and eventual passing of his father, the writer Gabriel García Márquez, in close detail. Amid family discussions and trips to the doctor, García explores the challenge of writing about grief while living within it. In the following excerpt, García documents the aftermath of his father's dementia diagnosis and considers the emotional weight of the memory loss upon the renowned writer.

Writing about the death of loved ones must be about as old as writing itself, and yet the inclination to do it instantly ties me up in knots. I am appalled that I am thinking of taking notes, ashamed as I take notes, disappointed in myself as I revise notes. What makes matters emotionally turbulent is the fact that my father is a famous person. Beneath the need to write may lurk the temptation to advance one's own fame in the age of vulgarity. Perhaps it might be better to resist the call and to stay humble. Humility is, after all, my favorite form of vanity. But as with most writing, the subject matter chooses you, and so resistance could be futile.

A few months earlier a friend asked how my dad was doing with his loss of memory. I told her he lives strictly in the present, unburdened by the past, free of expectations for the future. Forecasting based on previous experience, which is believed to be of evolutionary significance as well as one of the origins of storytelling, no longer plays a part in his life.

"So he doesn't know he's mortal," she concluded. "Lucky him."

Of course, the picture I painted for her is simplified. It is dramatized. The past still plays a part in his conscious life. He relies on the distant echo of his considerable interpersonal skills to ask anyone he meets a series of safe questions: "How is everything?" "Where are you living these days?" "How are your people?" Occasionally he'll venture an attempt at a more ambitious exchange and become disoriented in the middle of it, losing the thread of the idea or running out of words. The puzzled expression on his face, as well as the embarrassment that crosses it momentarily, like a puff of smoke in a breeze, betrays a past when conversation was as natural to him as breathing. Creative, funny, evocative, provocative conversation.

Being a great conversador was almost as highly regarded among his oldest group of friends as being a good writer.

The future is also not completely behind him. Often at dusk he asks, "Where are we going tonight? Let's go out to a fun place. Let's go dancing. Why? Why not?" If you change the subject enough times, he moves on.

He recognizes my mother and addresses her as Meche, Mercedes, La Madre, or La Madre Santa. There were a few very difficult months not long ago when he remembered his lifelong wife but considered the woman in front of him claiming to be her to be an impostor.

"Why is she here giving orders and running the house if she is nothing to me?"

My mother reacted to this with anger.

"What is wrong with him?" she asked in disbelief.

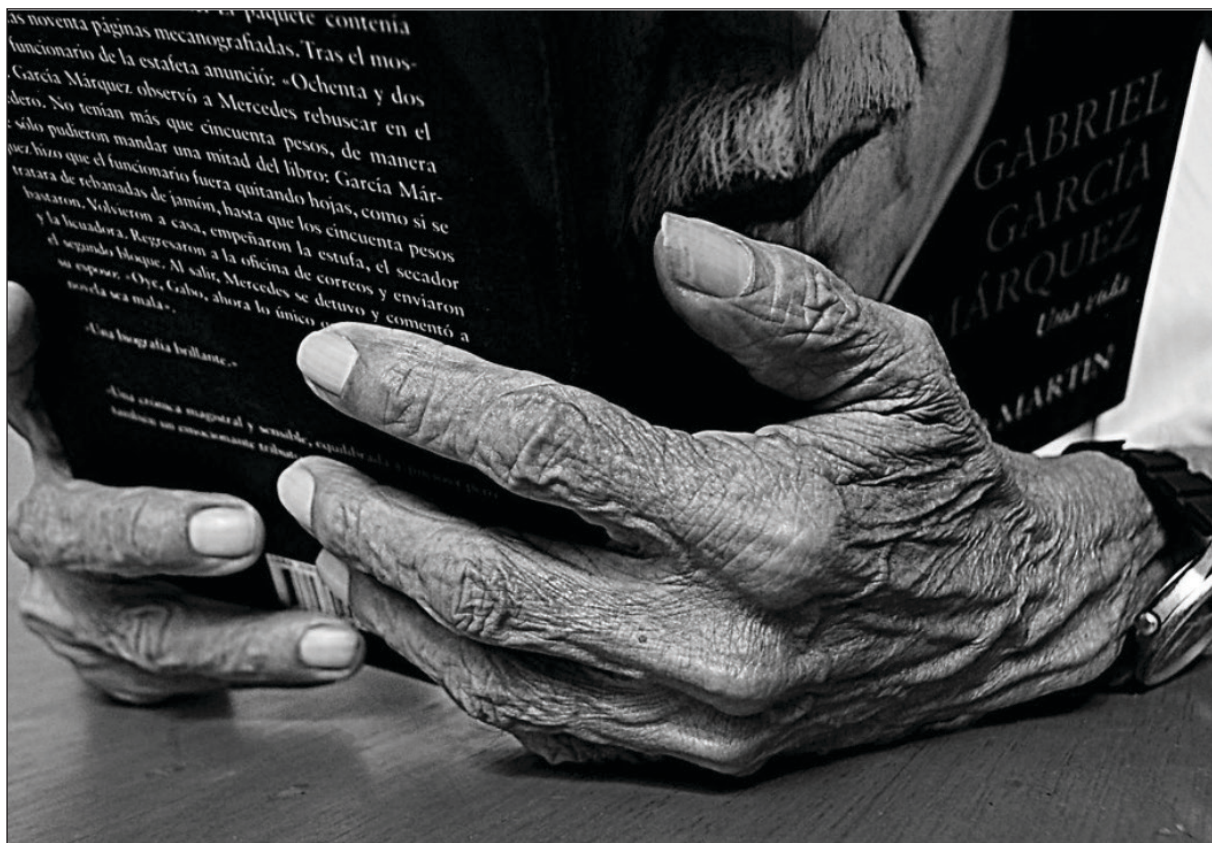
"It's not him, Mom. It's dementia." She looked at me like I was trying to pull a fast one. Surprisingly, that period passed, and she regained her proper place in his mind as his principal companion. She is the last tether. His secretary, his driver, his cook, who have all worked in the house for years, he recognizes as familiar and friendly people who make him feel safe, but he no longer knows their names. When my brother and I visit, he looks at us long and hard, with uninhibited curiosity. Our faces ring a distant bell, but he cannot make us out.

"Who are those people in the next room?" he asks a housekeeper.

"Your sons."

"Really? Those men? Carajo. That's incredible."

There was an uglier period a couple of years earlier. My father was fully aware of his mind slipping away.



Una vida (a life), image by pierre pouliquin, used under Creative Commons

He asked for help insistently, repeating time and time again that he was losing his memory. The toll of seeing a person in that state of anxiety and having to tolerate their endless repetitions over and over and over again is enormous. He would say, "I work with my memory. Memory is my tool and my raw material. I cannot work without it. Help me," and then he would repeat it in one form or another multiple times an hour for half an afternoon. It was grueling. That eventually passed. He regained some tranquility and would sometimes say, "I'm losing my memory, but fortunately I forget that I'm losing it," or "Everyone treats me like I'm a child. It's good that I like it."

His secretary tells me that one afternoon she found him standing alone in the middle of the garden, looking off into the distance, lost in thought.

"What are you doing out here, Don Gabriel?"

"Crying."

"Crying? You're not crying."

"Yes, I am. But without tears. Don't you realize that my head is now shit?"

On another occasion, he said to her: "This isn't my home. I want to go home. Home to my dad. I have a bed next to my dad's."

We suspect he was referring not to his father but to his grandfather, the colonel (and the inspiration for Colonel Aureliano Buendía), with whom he lived until

he was eight. The colonel was the most influential man in his life. My father slept on a small mattress on the floor next to his bed. They never saw each other after 1935.

"That's the thing about your father," his secretary says to me. "Even ugly things he can talk about beautifully."

Rodrigo García was born in Colombia, grew up in Mexico City, and studied history at Harvard University. His features as writer and director include Nine Lives, Albert Nobbs, and Last Days in the Desert. García has directed for television series such as Six Feet Under, The Sopranos, and Big Love, for which he received an Emmy nomination. He also directed several episodes of HBO's In Treatment, where, in addition to directing, he served as writer, executive producer, and series showrunner. García currently resides in Los Angeles with his family.

Excerpted from A Farewell to Gabo and Mercedes: A Son's Memoir of Gabriel García Márquez and Mercedes Barcha, by Rodrigo García. Excerpt published courtesy of HarperVia, copyright © 2021 HarperCollins.

■ Fleeing to safety

The fall of Kabul:

Writer and activist **Mark Isaacs**, former President of Sydney PEN, writes about the situation in Afghanistan in August following a telephone interview with Khalid, a Hazara under threat from the Taliban. Mark travelled to Afghanistan in 2016 to report on the safety of asylum seekers returned to Afghanistan by the Australian Government. From his experience, he wrote *The Kabul Peace House*.

On Sunday morning, just two days ago, Khalid woke up at dawn and fled his home in the mountains of central Afghanistan. The Taliban had invaded the region and Khalid was terrified of being targeted. As a member of the Hazara ethnic group, a community that has been particularly persecuted by the Taliban, and a person who performed peace-building work with the international community, Khalid had good reason to think the Taliban would want him dead. A few days earlier he had received a call from an old acquaintance asking after him and his work. This acquaintance had recently declared himself a member of the Taliban.

Khalid had no choice but to run. He gathered the documents he would need to assist him to leave the country and seek asylum abroad, documents that proved his association with foreign organisations and could be used against him if he was caught. He arranged for a car to take him, his mother and several other neighbours to Kabul. His other family members including his brothers and sisters escaped into the mountain passes like so many others had done in the decades of conflict before. His colleagues who dared not risk the road to Kabul went into hiding.

By this time, the Taliban controlled the majority of the country and were circling in on the capital. On the way, Khalid and his mother were stopped by Talib soldiers who began to question the passengers. If the soldiers found his papers, Khalid would be killed. His mother and the other women in the car were wearing burqas which were suffocating but protected them from the suspicious gaze of the soldiers.

The interrogation was interrupted by gunfire. The Talib soldiers controlling the road were being attacked by Afghan national forces. Armed men rushed to join the battle until Khalid's car was surrounded by roughly 200 fighters. An airstrike decimated the area. Dismembered bodies littered the road. Legs, hands and unidentifiable pieces of meat were strewn across their path. The battle lasted twenty minutes and in the aftermath the Talibs let the travellers go.



An Afghan family fleeing violence in Helmand Province takes shelter in a displaced people's camp in Kabul. Photograph by Mark Isaacs

Any relief from surviving the gunfight quickly dissipated when they reached Kabul, a city under siege. Taliban forces and the Afghan national army were fighting in various parts of the city. Gunfire could be heard at all hours of the day. The fall of the national government was imminent. Up until Sunday people from all over the country had been seeking refuge in Kabul. Displaced people with nowhere else to go were sleeping on the street. Now they were forced to flee once again.

The roads were clogged with traffic. Everyone was in a rush, but the cars moved only inch by inch. Robberies and violence had made the streets unsafe. The lines to various embassies were hours long.

Hundreds of people stormed the Kabul airport believing that US forces could evacuate them. People grappled in the crowd, punching, yelling, kicking, pulling, desperate to get to the front of the line. It proved to be a false rumour. The few military airplanes remaining at the airport were surrounded by US soldiers who fired guns into the air in order to intimidate and deter the swelling crowd. The departing

a peace imagined

foreigners were taking very few people with them. The avenues for escape were quickly closing. A desperate few climbed onto a departing plane, eventually falling to their deaths. The day Khalid and his mother arrived in Kabul seeking refuge, the Taliban took control of the city.

The speed of the Taliban's assault and the capitulation of the Afghan national forces have taken most people by surprise. In June, US intelligence assessments said the Taliban would seize Kabul in 6 to 12 months. Two weeks ago, the US military revised that prediction and said the capital could fall in 30 to 90 days. Few people thought that two decades and trillions of dollars of international involvement would fall apart so quickly.

The Taliban promised no retribution would be enacted upon those who supported the international occupation, but this is already being refuted. Afghans on the ground report that after seizing districts and cities, the Taliban have been executing individuals who have collaborated with foreign forces, whether military or civilian.

As they moved across the country, the Taliban performed targeted killings of journalists and civil society activists. Some reports suggest that women are being married off to jihadists. Talibs are scouring the Internet searching for Afghans who have been involved with the international community. Those who live abroad are fearful for their families who remain behind. Once the Taliban took control of Kabul, some citizens revealed themselves to be Talib supporters. Now there are fears they have been acting as spies secretly collecting information.

"There are Taliban spies everywhere," Khalid says.

All of this occurs in the backdrop of severe drought, food insecurity, economic collapse, and the COVID-19 pandemic. There are grave fears of famine, massacre and genocide.

"Afghanistan is worse than it has ever been," Khalid says.

This is what has become of the international community's promises of peace, prosperity and freedom.

The rapid blitz has meant many people are trapped, unable to leave. Financial institutions are closed. People can't withdraw money. Those who have money are trying to leave the country, but the roads are controlled by Taliban forces and visas to safe countries are difficult to come by. Those who can't leave are in hiding. The airports are closed and evacuation from Afghanistan is looking more and more unlikely. Despite the dangers of travel, refugees are spilling across borders into the neighbouring countries of Iran,

Pakistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

Amidst the devastation and destruction, there is a keen sense of abandonment. Those who bought into the dreams of freedom and equality have now been left exposed. For the past years of conflict, thousands of Afghans who fled to Europe were sent back to danger. Only in the past weeks have European countries started to temporarily halt deportations, but even that is a contentious issue in the European Union. The question is will European countries and the US open their borders and expand their refugee programs to accept Afghans? Or will they turn their backs on their failed experiment and the people they left behind?

It has been twenty years since Australia joined the US in Afghanistan. Now that "Operation Enduring Freedom" has collapsed, immediate action is needed to save as many lives as possible. There is a narrow window of opportunity to assist.

Afghan community leaders and Australian NGO and refugee advocacy groups have moved swiftly to create necessary action. What is clear is that the Australian government needs to offer additional refugee resettlement places for Afghan refugees immediately and facilitate the process of evacuating Afghans to safety. It needs to expand family repatriation programs for Afghans living in Australia so they can assist their families to flee. Until now people arriving by boat were denied that opportunity. Within Australia, 53 Afghan refugees remain in long-term detention and thousands more hold temporary protection visas. It's now clear that these refugees will not be able to safely return to Afghanistan and they should immediately be allowed to live in the community and be offered permanent protection visas.

You can help by contacting your local Federal MP now, asking them to urge the Morrison Government to do everything possible to evacuate people who are at grave risk within Afghanistan, including those who have worked for or assisted the Australian Government and Australian organisations (including the embassy, armed forces, NGOs and media), human rights defenders and women and girls whose lives and security are under great threat.

**This is an excerpt from a piece commissioned and published by Changemakers. Names and identifying details have been changed and purposefully obscured to protect the identity of participants.*

**Mark Isaacs, PEN committee member, is a reporter for ChangeMakers and author of the ChangeMakers Podcast called A Different Afghanistan – the Kabul Peace House. He is also the author of the book Kabul Peace House.*

Misinformation is a global problem. One of the solutions might work across continents, too.

Is there something WEIRD about fact-checking, asks **Sarah Scire**,
of the Nieman Lab?

Much of the research about combating misinformation with fact-checking comes from experiments that looked at single countries in North America, Europe, and Australia. By over-relying on Western, educated, industrialized, and rich countries – known, charmingly, to scholars as “WEIRD” populations – for data, were scholars making claims about fact-checking that would not hold up in other nations? Two researchers, Ethan Porter, of George Washington University’s School of Media and Public Affairs, and Thomas J. Wood, of Ohio State University’s political science department, wanted to find out.

In their study published recently, the researchers outlined how they conducted simultaneous fact-checking experiments in four countries (Argentina, South Africa, Nigeria, and the United Kingdom) that “differ starkly along educational, economic, and racial lines” to see if their power to reduce false beliefs translated across oceans and borders.

Twenty-two different statements, including two false claims about saltwater killing Covid-19 and “global cooling,” were presented to distinct groups of participants in all four countries. One group was randomly assigned to receive misinformation, another group received misinformation followed by a fact-check, and a third group was the control. Each group was tasked with identifying whether a related statement was true or false, including again two weeks after the initial testing.

What they found was largely promising:

- The fact-checks worked. Participants who saw fact-checked statements following misinformation showed “significant gains in factual accuracy” across the different countries. On average, the fact-checks increased factual accuracy by .6 points on a 5-point scale.
- The results were durable, too. More than two weeks after the participants encountered the fact-checks, at least some of their truth-boosting effect was still detectable.
- Exposure to misinformation did not decrease factual accuracy by a significant amount – just .07 on the same 5-point scale. The authors did note, though, that their results likely reflect “the lower boundary of misinformation’s effects” because their presentation did not include signals (like a source the participant knows) that would typically accompany misinformation in the wild.

- Although the study found fact-checking improved accuracy more than misinformation degraded it, the researchers noted that the misinformation effect for Covid-19 was the largest of all misinformation treatments they studied. “In contrast, and of special relevance at the present moment, misinformation regarding COVID-19 degraded accuracy about COVID in three of the four countries,” the report noted. (The United Kingdom was the exception.)

This last finding is just one reason that Africa’s top fact checkers are focused on fighting misinformation about Covid-19 in their countries. Fact-checkers including Ann Ngengere (from Viral Facts), Rabiul Alhassan (from GhanaFact) and Rose Lukalo-Owino and Enock Nyariki (from PesaCheck) spoke about the heightened challenge – and the lessons they’ve learned so far – at a recent Code For Africa event.

The uncertainties around the virus may make us more likely to believe untruths on the topic, suggested the event’s moderator, Cathy Imani, copy editor with PesaCheck.

“We’ve seen that governments, authorities, and influencers are giving conflicting information and wrong information — sometimes even sharing strange beliefs or outlandish claims,” Imani said. “As it is with things that are mysterious, things that we consider enigmatic, we tend to fill in the void using the information that we already have. Things like assumptions, beliefs, and biases come into play. And we know that if these things go unchecked, then they end up going viral.”

Misinformation can spread as fast as Covid itself, disrupting public health campaigns, economies, elections, and (of course) individual lives. At the beginning of the pandemic, much of the misinformation about Covid-19 concerned facts like how the virus is transmitted, its symptoms, where it originated, and how to best treat it.

Nowadays, more of the misinformation is centred on vaccines, according to Ann Ngengere, of Viral Facts. The best fact-checking tries to anticipate questions that audiences have, she said. It’s one reason why she recommends explainer.

“If you do not address the information gap when it arises, then you have the problem of coming to try to debunk after people have already started spreading the



Covid 19 messaging in Madagascar, image used under Creative Commons licence

misinformation,” Ms Ngengere said. “I think all of the fact-checkers on the panel will agree with me. It is very, very difficult to try and disseminate accurate information once the misinformation has already started spreading because it goes very viral very fast. It becomes difficult for you to amplify the accurate information and get the same visibility and engagement as the misinformation you are debunking.”

The fact-checkers on the panel emphasized the importance of partnerships, pointing to collaborations with local community radio journalists who they’ve trained to spot misinformation and digital literacy programs for members of the public. They also lean on each other to compare what other fact-checkers are seeing in their regions, as a way to anticipate what false beliefs may be taking root in their own communities.

People who value fact checking still share misinformation

More than 30 per cent of Australians who actively seek fact-checked information have shared misinformation themselves, a new study undertaken by the RMIT Fact Lab suggests.

The study found that subscribers to the fact checking newsletter CoronaCheck were inclined to share possible misinformation even as they described themselves as able to recognise the difference between accurate information and misinformation.

Dr Lauren Saling, a lecturer in psychology at RMIT University who worked on the study, says she was surprised at this result. “One would expect that people who are concerned about fake news and misinformation and actively seek fact-checked information would be unlikely to share information of which the veracity is unknown to them,” she said.

Around 1,400 people subscribe to CoronaCheck, the weekly email newsletter from RMIT ABC Fact Check. The majority said they subscribed to the newsletter in order to seek out accurate information or because they were concerned about misinformation. Surprisingly, 31.4 per cent of subscribers said they had shared information which they later learned to be inaccurate.

Researchers who worked on the study said that while a fact checking newsletter sensitises people to the importance of information accuracy, it seems it is not enough to prevent them from sharing possible misinformation. Among the reasons for sharing misinformation, 12.4 per cent did so for entertainment value, 35.7 per cent because the information seemed interesting and 38.3 per cent to get a second opinion.

Dr Saling said that while possible misinformation was often shared in order to seek an opinion about its veracity rather than to mislead others, it was still “very problematic” and risked engendering false beliefs in others.

Examining the challenges of free speech in universities

Universities have long been a site of heated debate, disagreement and contestation of ideas. Such disputes are likely inevitable – even welcome – given the nature of the institutions and the people who populate them, writes **Professor Carolyn Evans**, Vice Chancellor and President of Griffith University.

Sometimes contestation of ideas has been limited to classroom discussions or the pages of learned journals or books. Sometimes they have spilled into the public domain in protests, sit-ins, and even violence. Despite claims to the contrary, there is nothing particularly new about trying to shut down or discredit those holding opposing opinions and today's students are, if anything, rather more subdued than their grandparents when it comes to physical altercations and violent social disruption.

Despite this long history, there are those who argue that this generation of students are unusually fragile, their teachers are more concerned with political correctness than informed debate, and that freedom of speech is under particular challenge on our campuses. Are there new challenges now to freedom of speech and academic freedom as some commentators would claim or is this really a matter of the age-old cycle of each generation shaking their heads at the behaviours of the young?

It is not possible to discuss these issues as though their salience is global. The challenges faced by universities working under authoritarian governments are quite different to those whose main challenge might be the influence of the dominant religion and these differ again to those working in liberal democracies.

The most serious threats, worldwide, to freedom of speech on campuses are governments which seek to control the views of staff and students alike, along with high levels of control of the curriculum and research. In such countries, faculty and students may find themselves not only excluded from universities or disciplined internally, but also facing criminal sanctions for expressing their views.

A recent Scholars at Risk report notes that repercussions for scholars who express their views include: 'killings, violence and disappearances; wrongful prosecution and imprisonment; loss of position and expulsion from study; improper travel restrictions; and other severe or systemic issues (including, for example, military occupation of campuses, and this year in particular, online harassment of students and professors)'

This is an old problem but a persistent one as universities are often focal points of resistance to excessive government powers. Unfortunately, there appears to be little likelihood of it disappearing soon with many countries taking an authoritarian turn, which has proved dangerous to faculty and students alike.

The issues faced by universities in liberal democracies such as Australia are not as significant as those elsewhere and the consequences for students and academics with respect to freedom of speech issues are not as dramatic. They can, however, be consequential and changes in modern media and social media have created a more complex environment in which they need to be resolved.

Historically, most of the debates and disputes on university campuses were matters that were covered by local or even student media, if they were covered at all. Such media generally had specific deadlines (for the evening newscast or the morning edition of the paper) giving some capacity for university leaders to work on solutions or prepare careful responses after at least a period for understanding the facts or context. While major events, such as a large protest or sit in, were newsworthy, most debates remained on campus with little public attention.

Traditional media now works far more on a 24/7 news cycle creating a large appetite for content, particularly controversial content; digital news platforms and 24-hour news services demand quick responses from institutions. There is a danger in these circumstances that the response is not thought through, decisions are not made at the appropriate level, and the opportunities to use more nuanced methods to de-escalate conflicts are given little chance to work.

Social media has also played a role in accelerating the timelines to deal with contentious issues as well as creating additional challenges of its own.

Social media has vastly extended the reach of controversies and limited the time that university leaders have to respond to them. A post on a popular social media site can be accessed nearly instantaneously around the world. The way in which



‘Student march and occupation’ by Manos Simonides is published under Creative Commons licence.

the issue is portrayed is often partial and designed to be inflammatory – the more partisan and controversial a post, the more likely it is to be shared and promoted.

A university may find itself or one of its staff or students subject to sustained attack from a global audience with no notice and before the facts are fully understood on the ground. Most traditional media (although certainly not all) would engage in at least some level of fact checking or seek a response from those criticised, but social media creates very large audiences for people who have none of the ethical constraints of journalists and who are often not susceptible to legal processes as they are anonymous or based in other countries. Such attacks, which may be defamatory, untrue or utilise evidence taken out of context, can cause enormous distress to those targeted by them and potentially cause serious reputational damage to the university.

The growth in these platforms and other digital tools has also led to issues that were previously off the radar being shared widely. One example has been the trend in students recording part or all of a class and using some element of what was said during that class to shame the faculty member and sometimes to put pressure on the administration to discipline the teacher involved. It is a tactic that has been used by the left and the right and such recordings can make a rapid impact online and jump over to traditional media. They attempt to bypass the normal complaint processes by creating a public crisis and the sense that immediate action must be taken to make that crisis disappear. The pressure on administrators to ‘respond’ by making quick decisions, often without the usual protections of due process, can be significant and create a real problem for academic freedom.

The changes to traditional media and rise of social media will continue to create complex issues of free speech in the foreseeable future. On the one hand, social media has given a much wider range of people a voice than before.

The use of social media to express views, including critical views, is one manifestation of freedom of speech.

Various platforms have been used by faculty very effectively to communicate their ideas to a broader audience or to allow students to raise concerns that might have otherwise been swept under the carpet. Online communities have allowed some groups who have been marginalised in public discourse to find others with similar experiences and may provide a lifeline to students who find it difficult to find their place at university.

Yet social media can easily become a tool to attempt to suppress free speech and bypass important safeguards. Virulent and massive attacks against some participants can create an environment which is intimidating and distressing. While some commentators have focused on the problems of left leaning ‘cancel culture’, women and people of colour appear to be particularly vulnerable to these tactics.

Both the left and the right use the tools of mainstream and social media to push back against ideas that they disagree with. Sometimes this is a contestation of ideas, which, however uncomfortable, contributes to free debate even if it is harsh and direct. Sometimes, however, under the guise of free speech, groups can take actions designed to limit the speech of others. Often hiding behind anonymity, social media users can create a torrent of abuse, threats, and vilification that seek to push those with whom they disagree out of the discussion (in extreme cases their stated aim can be even more damaging, encouraging violence against their target or self-harm). Speech such as this could be said to limit rather than promote free speech through the intimidation of those with whom the online mob disagrees.

Carolyn Evans is co-author with Adrienne Stone, with Jade Roberts, of Open Minds: Academic Freedom and Freedom of Speech in Australia.

- Global talent flocks to Facebook

Dozens of writers join new publishing platform ‘Bulletin’

In July, Facebook announced that more than 30 new writers were joining its independent publishing platform Bulletin, including Gen Z activist Malala Yousafzai and Eurasia Group founder Ian Bremmer, reports **Sara Fischer** for Media Trends, Axios.

Why it matters: The new additions show that Facebook’s initial investments in Bulletin, including millions of dollars’ worth of writer advances, have so far proven successful in luring global talent to the platform.

- All writers in this initial test phase of Bulletin are receiving multi-year licensing deals to start their newsletters and build a relationship with readers, a spokesperson said.
- Facebook announced an initial group of writers on the platform, including Malcolm Gladwell, organizational psychologist and author Adam Grant, Emmy-nominated sports broadcaster Erin Andrews and former CNN correspondent-turned-news entrepreneur Jessica Yellin.

Details: In total, 31 new writers, including celebrities, academics, activists, subject matter experts, scientists and authors, are joining the platform to build newsletters and websites.

- Some of the familiar names on the platform include former Obama official Robert Gibbs, actress Rhonda Ross and Emmy award-winning TV journalist Alina Cho.
- A slew of journalists will also launch newsletters on the platform, and up-and-coming newsletter writers will cover an array of topics, including science, design, mental health, and more.

What they’re saying: “I am excited to work with Bulletin because I think the platform can help me reach people in countries around the world,” says Malala Yousafzai.

“Some people may not know this, but I actually began my work as an activist for girls’ education and equality as a student blogger for the BBC. So writing about global issues and sharing my personal reflections is somewhat of a return to my roots.”

The big picture: Several tech and news platforms, like Facebook, Twitter, Substack and Forbes, are racing to attract newsletter writers amid a creator arms race. For Facebook, the ability to offer writers a wide



Jiquanda Johnson, of the Bulletin newsletter, *Black Like Us*

potential audience of social media users is a clear advantage.

- “Most of my audience is on Facebook. This is a way to leverage that audience and also bring new people to my work as an independent journalist,” says Jiquanda Johnson, author of the new Bulletin newsletter, *Black Like Us*, which tells stories from a variety of Black perspectives.
- “The Facebook Journalism Project has been very supportive of my work and local news efforts from independent publishers,” Ms Johnson says. “I suppose I’ve become loyal to organizations that have been loyal to the work I do.”

What’s next: Facebook is expected to announce a wave of local reporters who will join Bulletin in the coming weeks. The company said earlier this year that it has committed at least \$5 million to newsletter deals with local reporters.

Facebook users less interested in reading news on the platform

A healthy chunk of Facebook users say they don't get much news there any more — an outcome to be both expected and desired, reports **Joshua Benton** for the Nieman Lab.

It has been clear for several years that Facebook wishes it never got into the news business.

Sure, having a few news stories sprinkled throughout the news feed probably makes a subset of their users happy and more willing to tap that blue icon on their homescreen again tomorrow. But there aren't that many of them.

Only 12.9 per cent of posts viewed in the news feed have a link to anything, much less a link to a news site. The percent that are about news — defined broadly, including sports and entertainment — is now somewhere less than 4 per cent. It's something of a niche interest for Facebook users.

Meanwhile, oh, what a giant pain in the ass it has been for Zuck & Co.: Fake news, foreign propaganda, Covid lies, Nazis, horse paste, fact-checking, accusations of political bias, and a seemingly never-ending list of additional headaches. Because Facebook, architecturally, makes little distinction between the best sources and the worst — but, architecturally, incentivizes content that appeals to our less rational natures — it gets blamed for roughly 80 per cent of what ails the world.

Maybe you think that's fair; maybe you think it gets a bad rap. Either way, Facebook would be happy if all of it could be sucked right off its servers and replaced with more puppies and silly memes and Instagram sunsets. And the company has taken a steady series of steps to reduce the role of news, especially political news, on its platform, the latest just a few weeks ago.

A new study out recently from the Pew Research Center suggests it isn't just Facebook that's seeking a trial separation from the news — it's also Facebook's users.

As social media and technology companies face criticism for not doing enough to stem the flow of misleading information on their platforms, a new Pew Research Center survey finds that a little under half of U.S. adults (48 per cent) get news on social media sites "often" or "sometimes," a 5 percentage point decline from 2020.

Across the 10 social media sites asked about in this study, the percentage of users of each site who regularly get news there has remained relatively stable since 2020. However, both Facebook and TikTok buck this trend.

The share of Facebook users who say they regularly get

news on the site has declined 7 points since 2020, from 54 per cent to about 47 per cent in 2021. TikTok, on the other hand, has seen a slight uptick in the percentage of users who say they regularly get news on the site, rising from 22 per cent in 2020 to 29 per cent in 2021.

That people would be reducing their news use of social media isn't shocking; you may remember that 2020 was a pretty busy year! 2021, for all its continued pandemicity, has been at least a little less insane, news-wise. (Since January 20, at least.)

But Facebook's decline (7 percentage points) was substantially larger than Twitter's (4), Reddit's (3), Snapchat's (3), YouTube's (2), Instagram's (1), or LinkedIn's (1). (Besides TikTok, WhatsApp and Twitch saw increases, though small ones.)

And because Facebook's user base is so much larger than other (non-YouTube) social platforms, the impact of that drop in news usage is magnified. If my back-of-the-envelope math is right, the net decline in news usage on Facebook was about 5× the size of the net decline on Twitter. Facebook's seeing a bigger decline that's happening within a much larger user base.

That this is all happening despite 2020's splashy-sounding debut of the Facebook News Tab for all its (U.S.) users and the company wearing out its checkbooks writing checks to publishers around the world. As I've argued, those payments (and those from rival duopolist Google) should be understood more as paid lobbying than an actual attempt to center journalism as an important anchor of their platforms.

Facebook users tend to be more casual news consumers than users of more news-oriented platforms like Twitter or Reddit — so a reduction there is probably more significant to an individual user, in terms of their overall news diet. But that more casual news consumer is also the sort more likely to be time-targeted in their news consumption — the person who pays attention to politics for the 30 days before an election and ignores it the rest of the time — so a higher drop-off from 2020 shouldn't be too surprising.

But still, fewer people counting on Facebook for news is probably a good thing — and a sign that the interests of the company and its users may be strangely aligned, for once.

The case for international surveillance reform

In 2020, David Kaye, former special United Nations rapporteur for freedom of opinion and expression, pressed Israeli firm NSO Group in a public letter for details about its human rights due diligence and assertions that Saudi *Washington Post* columnist Jamal Khashoggi had not been targeted with its Pegasus spyware before his brutal 2018 murder. **Madeline Earp**, specialist technology writer documenting the impact of technology on press freedom, reports.

There's still no evidence Jamal Khashoggi himself was targeted with Pegasus, which can silently access the contents of a phone and monitor its surroundings. Yet as many as 10 other people connected with him have now been linked to the technology as part of the Pegasus Project, a collaborative media investigation of leaked data allegedly linked to NSO clients.

The Guardian reported that nine people – including Mr Khashoggi's fiancée, his son, and a Turkish prosecutor who charged 20 Saudi nationals with his murder – appear to have been selected for surveillance, in addition to Mr Khashoggi's friend Omar Abdulaziz.

"Researchers have uncovered how Pegasus is used in the wild, and they've done it through forensic tools," said Mr Kaye, citing the work of Amnesty International, which provided forensic research for the Pegasus Project, and internet research laboratory Citizen Lab. Mr Kaye is now a professor of law at the University of California, Irvine, with a special interest in public international law, international humanitarian law human rights and international criminal justice

"Not only do NSO certainly have the same tools, but they know who their clients are," he continued. "How is it that outsiders with no information about their clients can get so much information about the uses of the tool? It doesn't make a lot of sense."

In a statement attributed to the NSO Group, the company said, "We can confirm that our technology was not used to listen, monitor, track, or collect information regarding [Jamal Khashoggi] or his family members."

Referencing a previous response in which the company characterized the Pegasus Project as slander pushed by special interest groups, the statement said that NSO Group doesn't see evidence of the use of its technology in the Pegasus Project's forensic reporting and could not base an investigation on it.

"NSO will continue to push for serious international

discussions about regulation of the cyber intelligence industry," the statement said, noting that Mr Kaye has an open invitation to visit the company to discuss these issues.

The Committee to Project Journalists spoke to David Kaye about NSO Group and the moratorium on the use, sale, or transfer of surveillance tools that he and 150 individuals and rights groups – including CPJ — have called for pending implementation of human rights-respecting regulation. Mr Kaye is also the independent board chair of the Global Network Initiative, a multi-stakeholder alliance to support free expression and privacy on the internet, of which CPJ is a member. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Looking back to your time as special rapporteur, why was surveillance technology on your radar as a freedom of expression issue, and as something that should concern journalists?

When I started in 2014, it was a little over a year since the revelations that Edward Snowden launched on bulk collection of data by the United States National Security Agency, British GCHQ [Government Communications Headquarters] and others that partner with them in the intelligence space. That puts everybody, in a way, under potential surveillance.

It became clear that this wasn't the only kind of surveillance in the digital age. I became interested in the way in which small companies were making spyware available to governments that couldn't afford to have a mass surveillance operation. These targeted tools have a direct impact, not just on privacy but on people's willingness to communicate.

It has a particular impact on activists, and on journalists. If a journalist is tracked, that means her sources are tracked. Her ability to collect information, to maintain sources, is broken.

Originally when I was first thinking about this area,

I thought adherence to the U.N. Guiding Principles [on Business and Human Rights] would be a meaningful step for players in this industry – not just NSO Group but many other companies. But I've come to think that only government regulation will impose requirements that will be meaningful [enough] for the public to know what this industry does.

What stood out to you from all the Pegasus Project reporting that you've seen in the past week or two? Did you learn anything you didn't know?

It's not surprising, but it's shocking. What was striking was the extent to which governments – clients of NSO, but undoubtedly of other companies as well – see the technology as a tool to use against basic pillars of democratic life. [The reporting] highlights the very real possibility that this tool can be used against journalists, activists, and others in a way that is [supporting] autocracy, dictatorships, those who are trying to undermine democracy.

Even if [phone] numbers on these lists [being investigated by the Pegasus Project] are never actually subject to an effort to infect their phones with Pegasus, the threat is there – and the publicity of the threat is actually part of the effort to silence journalists and activists.

The fact that this is enabled by a company that operates in a democratic country [Israel, where NSO Group is based] and without real controls or constraints, that's frightening. The Pegasus Project underscores that for people. The spy scandal in Mexico [in which Pegasus was implicated in the spying on journalists and others] really rattled Mexican society and politics. I think what we're seeing is an expansion of that to places beyond Mexico.

Could we see something like that in Israel? The New York Times reported that Israel encouraged NSO Group's relationship with Saudi Arabia even after Khashoggi's murder, and Israeli lawyer Eitay Mack describes Israeli companies as heavily controlled by the Israeli Ministry of Defense. How can regulation account for that kind of dynamic?

It's important to separate out – although they are related – the global concern with an industry that has companies throughout Europe, the U.S., and involves tools that goes beyond Pegasus to all sorts of tools sold on the open market to governments around the world – from the particulars of NSO and Israeli governmental control of Pegasus.

On the one hand, we need a global effort to identify: What are the rules around export controls of surveillance technologies? To what extent should human rights be part of the assessment of any particular export application? Once you have those rules set up, it's up to national governments to implement those rules. That should happen.

The situation in Israel is like an instance of the global disfunction. NSO had offices in Cyprus and Bulgaria also, so there may be other export issues – but particularly when NSO required [an Israeli export] license, it's clear that the Israeli Ministry of

Defense understood who the clients were and had the potential to limit the export. But also, given how badly governments wanted access to Pegasus, the Israeli government probably understood that this could be a tool in their bilateral relations around the world.

That requires a focus on the specifics between Israel and NSO and deserves bilateral attention from the U.S. government and others, because to the extent that the government of Israel actually encouraged the export of this technology, it was supporting technologies that are in opposition to, for example, the Biden administration's concern about transnational repression. There's a lot of room here for a focused approach to getting Israel to rein in its own companies. It's just that it's harder to do the reining in if you don't have a great set of global norms.

What about zero-day exploits, which have been used to install Pegasus using a previously unknown vulnerability in other software? New York Times journalist Nicole Perlroth and others report that these are not subject to export control because they are often supplied by hackers. How can global rules account for those?

In some ways, this is no different to the black market weapons trade, which exists even though there are global rules around the transfer of weapons, or the private mercenary environment, where you have an emerging set of norms and some international law, but you also have [black market] operators.

We're at the stage of creating the normative framework, and then the legal framework, that limits this trade, and also creates a kind of pressure on those who would be operating on the black market, in the shadows. Right now, it's almost as if there are no shadows, because there are no legal constraints.

We see a lot of governments legislating to introduce fines for social media companies or even jail terms for their executives. Why do you think it's so easy for us to pursue accountability in that area when we're so behind in how we regulate this highly problematic surveillance industry?

The rules that guide social media, or other companies that are mediating speech – and the impact they have on the information that we see – is pretty obvious. Because social media companies are advertising companies, we all feel implicated by their choices as to what information they surface in our feeds.

By contrast, the surveillance industry is kind of a force multiplier for authoritarian regimes. They don't need to sell to everybody, they're perfectly happy being unknown to the public, and [their] clients only need to target a handful of people to achieve their goals. Any one of the clients that has been identified in recent reporting on NSO would need to target maybe a dozen journalists in order to intimidate them, dry up their sources of information, and make it harder for them to report information to the public.

Diving into the Pegasus leak

Investigative journalists recently revealed that the spyware company NSO Group was in the employ of dozens of countries, tracking thousands of activists, human rights advocates, journalists, writers, and even heads of state with the software, Pegasus.

Matt Bailey, PEN America's program director of digital freedom, discussed these revelations and the free expression implications of the scandal.

On Pegasus and how it is being used

"What's alarming here is that one, no action is needed, to be infected by this software. Two, we're unlikely to ever know the full extent of how it's been used. . . . It's a tool that is used to gain total access to a target person's cell phone and all the records on it. It's been used here [for] other than its stated or nominal intended purpose of law enforcement of tracking down the real bad guys around the world to suppress political opposition, activism, and legitimate journalism around the world."

On what's new about this scandal

"It's kind of really bizarre – the idea that countries are reaching out to this company, essentially dialing a 1-800 number and saying, 'Hey, could you help me spy on these dissidents? Could you help me spy on these activists?' What you have is a company that is not the only one of its kind. They are evocative of this surveillance and spyware economy that's been burgeoning – depending on where you want to put the starting gun – five to 10, 20 years, in various different iterations.

"What's bad about this is it's harnessing the power of the marketplace. There's a lot of demand for surveillance, there's a lot of money that can be thrown at it by all these companies, by organized crime, by kleptocrats, to target their enemies.

And that means that these companies can grow in a way that intelligence services or highly technical teams within government generally don't or can't, and they can do it largely as it stands, without being subject to a lot of the internal controls that we hope that those intelligence services would be subjected to, particularly within institutionally strong democracies.

"What's different here is not so much that you have governments doing bad stuff with surveillance technologies. That's always bad, it's always been around. What's really alarming here is that it's a commercial service, and that it's part of a whole market sector, if you will, that's growing rapidly, both in terms of its scale – the number of providers – and the sophistication of the tools that it has on offer."

On the larger free speech implications

"What I'm really worried about here is the larger effects. Let's say there's 50,000 people total in the world – let's pretend that's the total number who've ever been targeted with Pegasus. How many [more in the world] do you think are sitting around today, freaking out about whether they were targeted by Pegasus?

That number is easily in the millions. And those people are sitting and thinking about, 'Okay, well the next time that I, as a journalist, do some really sensitive reporting, to hold corrupt interests of my country to account, or the next time that I'm communicating with somebody about something terrible and sensitive that's happened in their lives, or just with my friends and family, how likely is it that that's going to be subject to surveillance and wholesale retrieval by these antagonistic powers?' So that chilling effect, that moment of hesitation, or the moment that the journalist, the activist, the dissident, decides not to do something, because they know this technology's out there? That's really what I'm worried about. The scale of that is global.

"A lot of the conversations I've been in this week and that we're all having right now are all about how we contend with that marketplace. . . but also how do we ever get to a place where we feel sure that we have privacy and security of our data on our phones, of our conversations, in order to make sure we can continue to do the work that we need to do to support free expression?"



Matt Bailey, PEN America

■ Stopping the abuse

How social media can provide support for targets of online abuse

As part of an effort to #FightOnlineAbuseNow, PEN America has committed to exposing the harm online abuse poses to free speech.



The online abuse that writers, journalists, and other social media users face — whether a coordinated onslaught of hateful insults or a single violent threat — can be traumatic. In the middle of such severe attacks, it can be difficult, if not impossible, for the targeted user to figure out how to mitigate the abuse and get help.

“When you’re experiencing stress, your body goes into an alarm state,” says Elana Newman, research director at the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma. “All your key systems slow down so that your emergency system can work, and either freeze, run away, or prepare to fight back. In an emergency mode you’re not thinking rationally.”

To navigate these terrifying situations, users need to be able to quickly access personalized support in real time. This is where PEN proposes an SOS button and emergency hotline.

An SOS button, when activated, would trigger heightened in-platform protections and direct the user to external resources. These protections could include: turning on anti-abuse filters; activating rapid response teams; tightening privacy and security settings; and enabling the blocking, reporting, and documentation of abusive content in bulk (rather than piecemeal). Through an emergency hotline, users could call or chat with someone trained to provide personalized, trauma-informed support in real time.

Both the SOS button and the emergency hotline should be integrated directly into social media platforms so they can be easily accessible. If users can’t quickly find these features in urgent situations, there is little point in having them.

“Many of the writers and journalists I’ve worked with who have faced severe online abuse describe feeling overwhelmed and uncertain about what to do when they’re under attack,” said Viktorya Vilks, PEN America’s program director for digital safety and free expression. “They sometimes turn to friends, family, and nonprofit organizations like ours for support, but they should also be able to get help — when they need it most — from the very platforms on which they’re being abused.”

When writers, journalists, and others feel unsafe on social media, they are often silenced or driven offline altogether. Moreover, we know that women, as well as Black, Indigenous, Latino, LGBTQ+, and religious and ethnic minority communities experience especially egregious online abuse.

If social media companies are serious about their oft-stated commitments to equity, inclusion, and free speech, they have to do a better job ensuring that vulnerable users feel safe to participate freely. Adding an SOS button and emergency hotline would be a major step to making that possible.

For eight years I've served Australia. The racist hate and disgusting abuse still crushes me

I gave up my birthright to run for office. I've been called a maggot, a cockroach, a whore and a cow – but I'm not going anywhere, says **Dr Mehreen Faruqi**, the Greens' senator for NSW.

Y*ou are not really Australian, Mehreen. Why don't you fuck off to the cesspit you came from?"*
"Piss off back to your shithole of Pakistan, ya maggot."

This is not something I expected to hear – ever, let alone in Australia. Yet from day one of my public life, I have felt pummelled and beaten almost every day by this unrelenting demand to go back to where I came from. I feel the heavy weight of this hate physically bearing down on me, crushing me, squeezing the air out of my lungs until I feel suffocated. This has only got worse with time. For the first time, I have started to question my belonging in this place I call home. For the first time since arriving in Sydney in 1992, I've started to doubt my decision to migrate from Lahore.

No matter what I say, my motives are constantly questioned. Whether I'm advocating for stronger animal welfare laws, for abolishing fees for university and TAFE education or for more funding for public schools or women's rights, or speaking out against racism, the disgusting abuse thrown at me by my detractors is always the same. It's echoed on my social media accounts, in emails and in phone calls to my office. I can provoke this reaction by simply opening my mouth.

Why are you even here? they ask.

You weren't born here. What right do you have to tell us what to do?

Your country is shit. Why are you bringing that filth here to our country?

You don't belong here. You should be deported. Go back.

Go back.

Go back.

Being born a person of colour outside Australia is a permanent mark that is used to render me, and people like me, irrelevant and voiceless in white-colonised countries. This rule doesn't apply to white politicians who were born overseas and migrated here, like Julia Gillard or Tony Abbott.

Perhaps I should feel powerful in my ability to poke

the proverbial bear without even trying. I don't.

Plenty of people have extended a hand of support, and I am grateful for this. The reality, though, is that however well-meaning they are, they cannot understand the personal toll that such abuse takes – on me, on my family and on my staff.

My daughter, Aisha, was 16 when I came into the public eye. Just a couple of years after that, on a Saturday night, we were walking along the bridge on the beautiful Brisbane River, enjoying the view and an increasingly rare moment of catching up. I casually tweeted some photos of this lovely scene with my daughter. A short time later an anonymous Twitter user responded.

Up until then, I had chosen to ignore the xenophobic messages sent my way, but this one really ate away at me. It felt so malicious and full of hate. I decided to expose it on my Facebook page. What followed was a seemingly endless stream of racist and offensive communications.

I was told that white Australia was the real victim, not a "whingeing" Muslim. People called my office to harass my staff, demanding to know how many Anzac Day dawn service ceremonies I had attended. An image of my face was photoshopped on to a flag-waving Islamic State militant and then spread online. One person even created an online petition calling for evidence that I had renounced my Pakistani citizenship.

My daughter was so burned by the experience that for years afterwards she did not want to discuss politics or my work at all.

Vicious insults and abuse hurt. So does advice to stay silent in the face of such vitriol. "Helpful" advice like "they're just trolls" or "just ignore them" rings hollow when it comes from people who haven't had to worry about their own safety or that of their family. "Trolls" are real people sending hate-filled messages to other real people, who then have to live with the consequences. I've had days when I've wanted to crawl under the doona and never get out. Ever.

It took me a while to understand that the horrid, hateful backlash pitched at me is about who I am, and



Dr Mehreen Faruqi

not necessarily what I stand for. The loathing always boils down to my identity as a migrant Muslim woman.

I did not expect this of Australia.

The relentless demands for me to prove my Australianness, while ridiculous, do hurt. I've dedicated the last eight years of my life to serving the people of New South Wales. I've given up my birthright to do this. I'm no longer a citizen of the country where generations of my family have lived, a country for whose independence they had fought. This was not easy. After filling out the forms to renounce my Pakistani citizenship, the papers sat in my desk drawer for many days. I could not bring myself to sign on the dotted line. I know it was only a piece of paper. But signing it had symbolic as well as actual implications.

I can see why so many would not do it. Why should we have to? Why should we be forced to extinguish ties with our roots, to deny who we are just to satisfy a misplaced sense of loyalty? This makes no sense in a country where almost one-third of us were born overseas and almost half of us have a parent born overseas. This only alienates people from engaging with democracy. How does forcing someone to renounce their citizenship of their country of birth guarantee their loyalty to their adopted country anyway? Surely it's their track record, their integrity, their work that should be up for scrutiny and judgment. I know people who would make great representatives but don't want to give up their ancestry. For me, sadly, even giving up my birthright isn't enough. I'm still harassed constantly to prove my Australianness.

To those who question my Australianness: when you abuse me, that reflects on me, my family, my community, my heritage and migrants as a whole. We are not here to be insulted or marginalised if we don't fall into the narrow conception of what you think it means to be "Australian", or tolerated if you deem us to be Australian enough. You can't whitewash a country with Black foundations.

I am made in Pakistan. I am proud of my roots. I'm even prouder of my heritage. Now Australia is my home. Yes, Australia did give me the opportunity to be changed and now to fight for change. That's great, but don't expect me to be eternally grateful and stay in the corner you've created for migrants, where you pat us on the head if we fit your notion of what an Australian is – but vilify us, silence us and try to hound us out of our homes if we don't. My husband and I have worked hard to be where we are now. We are proud and upstanding citizens of this country and we make Australia a better place.

You can call me names. You can call me a maggot, a whore, a cockroach, a cow. You can demand I fuck off back to where I came from. Sorry, not sorry. This is my home. I'm not going anywhere. You will not grind me down. You will not shut me up. I'm not a maggot, a cockroach, a whore or a cow. I am a migrant. I am a Muslim. I am a woman. I am an engineer. I am here to stay.

This is an edited extract from Too Migrant, Too Muslim, Too Loud by Mehreen Faruqi, published by Allen & Unwin

Sydney PEN: the beginning

The origins of Sydney PEN, the times in which it evolved, is now part of the special online exhibition entitled 'Unlocking the History of PEN International'. It documents the 140 PEN centres in more than 100 countries, the special committees devoted Translation and Linguistic Rights, Women Writers, Writers for Peace, and Writers in Prison, and its special protection work on behalf of persecuted writers.

Researched and written by **Sandra Symons**

In the 1920s, after Australian soldiers had returned home from World War I, the country made the most of the Roaring Twenties, the jazz era, when for many people the country was enjoying a prosperous economy. It was a time of great optimism and progress. Women had greater freedom of expression and found work outside the home. This was reflected in their new fashions, short hair, smoking, dancing and improved access to jobs and education.

The end of the war also saw Australia enter a period of political unrest and strikes. Unions became more militant in order to protect workers' rights. There was industrial discontent and hardship and by the turn of the decade, there was tumult. The Wall Street crash in 1929 was followed by the Depression which swept the world at the time World War II began. But even as 1930s were turbulent with high unemployment, poverty, low profits, deflation, and plunging incomes, Australia's cultural history blossomed.

Where previously men dominated the news, politics and the arts, as the 1920s unfolded women started to demand attention. As writer Dr Drusilla Modjeska recounts in her book, *Exiles at Home: Australian Women Writers 1925-1945*, "women were producing the best fiction of the period and they were ... a dominant influence in Australian literature".

Academic Dr Beverley Kingston said in her book *My Wife, My Daughter and Poor Mary Ann* that Australian women no longer had to "regard marriage as a full-time and totally demanding occupation". As women began to join organisations such as the Australian Women's Guild of Empire during years of major industrial strikes and lockouts and take on social justice issues and organisations in the early 1930s, it came as little surprise that three influential women writers set up the Sydney chapter of International PEN in 1931. Those women were Mary Gilmore, Ethel Turner and Dorothea Mackellar.

Twenty years separated them, with Mary Gilmore born in 1865, Ethel Turner in 1872 and Dorothea Mackellar in 1885. They worked in different ways but all were active in Australian letters at the same time.



Dame Mary Gilmore

Mary Gilmore, later Dame Mary, who wrote both prose and poetry, grew up in rural New South Wales and qualified as a schoolteacher when she was 16. She later became involved in the growing labour movement and utopian socialism. She worked as a journalist in Sydney for *The Australian Worker*, *The Bulletin* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*. She published her own work, mostly poems, memoirs and essays, prolifically. Later in life she became the doyenne of the Sydney literary world, and became something of a national icon, making frequent appearances in the new media of radio and television. Before 1940 she published six volumes of verse and three editions of prose. After the war, she published volumes of memoirs and reminiscences of colonial Australia and the literary giants of 1890s Sydney, thus contributing much material to the mythologising of that period. Dame Mary Gilmore died in 1962, aged 97.

Ethel Turner, who was born in Doncaster, Yorkshire, England in 1872, migrated to Australia with her widowed mother, older sister Lilian and step sister, Jeannie in 1880.

Educated at Sydney Girls' High School, she and Lilian wrote stories and edited magazines, first *The Iris* and then *The Parthenon*. The sisters used pseudonyms



Ethel Turner

to give the impression that the various sections of the magazine were written by a number of contributors, while in reality the two sisters did all the writing themselves. Being the younger sister, Ethel was left to do the children's page.

Ethel went on to write The Children's Page in *The Illustrated Sydney News*, which was later taken over by *Town and Country Journal*. Like Mary Gilmore, she also contributed to *The Bulletin*.

In 1896 Ethel married lawyer Herbert Curlew and together they built a house overlooking Middle Harbour. The house, Avenel, is where Ethel Turner spent the rest of her years.

Her best-known work is her first novel, *Seven Little Australians* (1894), which was published when she was 22 and is now widely considered a classic of Australian children's literature. It was an instant hit both in Australia and overseas. It is about a family of seven children growing up in Australia. The book, together with its sequels *The Family at Misrule* (1895) and *Little Mother Meg* (1902) deal with the lives of the Woolcot family, particularly with its seven mischievous and rebellious children, in 1880s Australia. The book was made into a feature film in Australia in 1939 and a UK television series in Britain in 1953. A 10-episode television series was made in 1973 by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

Ethel Turner published a number of other books for children, short stories and poems. *Three Little Maids* (1900) is a strongly autobiographical novel about her family's migration from England to Sydney, Australia. She wrote more than forty novels. The Ethel Turner Prize for Young People's Literature is given annually under the auspices of the New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards. Ethel Turner died at Mosman in 1958 at 85.

Acclaimed poet Dorothea Mackellar was born in 1885, at her family's home 'Dunara' overlooking Rose Bay on Sydney Harbour.

The third of four children, Dorothea was the only daughter born to renowned physician and Parliamentarian, Sir Charles Kinnaird Mackellar and



Dorothea Mackellar

his wife, Marion. She was given private tutoring in painting, fencing and languages and later attended lectures at Sydney University. Speaking French, German, Italian and Spanish fluently, Dorothea acted as interpreter when the family travelled overseas.

According to historian Beverley Kingston, Dorothea began writing while quite young and surprised her family when magazines not only published but paid for her verses and prose pieces. In 1908 a poem, 'Core of My Heart' appeared in the *London Spectator*. It reappeared several times in Australia before being included as 'My Country' in her first book, *The Closed Door and Other Verses* in 1911). As a result of its frequent inclusion in anthologies, 'My Country' became one of the best-known Australian poems, appealing to the sense of patriotism fostered by the war and post-war nationalism.

Photographs of Dorothea in her twenties show her to have been then an ideal image of the Australian girl. She was said to be a strong swimmer, a keen judge of horses and dogs. Her verse shows that she was cultivated and spirited, her novels that she was hopelessly romantic, Dr Kingston says. Her writing, once the product of youthful passions and enthusiasms, became increasingly souvenirs of travel or dependent on Nature for inspiration. Literary historian H. M. Green described her as "a lyrical of colour and light" in love with the Australian landscape. She herself never professed to be a poet. "I have written – from the heart, from imagination, from experience – some amount of verse."

Despite her 'loathing all restrictions and meetings', Dorothea Mackellar was honorary treasurer of the Bush Book Club of NSW and active in the formation in 1931 of Sydney PEN. She became responsible for her ageing parents, and apparently wrote little after her father's death in 1926. Her mother died in 1933 and Dorothea, 'a not particularly robust dormouse', was frequently in poor health. She died in her sleep on 14th January 1968.

Into the 21st century

Mary Gilmore, Ethel Turner and Dorothea Mackellar, acclaimed Australian women writers, launched Sydney PEN in 1931 as a way to unite writers after the devastation of World War One. It was set up as a congenial club providing a space for writers to share ideas and socialise. It continued thus for many decades, a loose organisation of interested writers who shared common ambitions and concerns.

However, by the time the century turned into the 21st, Sydney PEN was a much more formal organisation with a management committee, a writers' advisory board, and a list of esteemed life members. And it was conducting campaigns and events supporting literature, fostering international understanding and defending freedom of expression.

In November 2004, Sydney PEN, as part of the Australian PEN network, won the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Community Award for its work with asylum seeker writers held in Australian detention centres.

In the same year, together with other two Australian PEN Centres, it established a new biennial award, the PEN Keneally Award for recognising an achievement in promoting freedom of expression, international understanding and access to literature. The award is named in the honour of acclaimed novelist Thomas Keneally AO (winner of the 1982 Booker Prize) for "his lifetime's commitment to the values of PEN". Recipients include the late Indonesian publisher and translator Joesoef Isak, novelist Frank Moorhouse, academic Dr Katharine Gelber and journalists and writers David Marr and Richard Acland.

As well, since 2006, the organisation has hosted the Sydney PEN Award to recognise the members who have worked hard to promote the PEN Centre's value. They include the late writer Dr Rosie Scott, novelist and academic Professor Nicholas Jose, literary curator and project director, and journalist Chip Rolley, writer and researcher Dr Denise Leith, and writer and literary agent Gaby Naher.

PEN launched its biannual magazine in 2005 to carry articles by members as well as professional writers and journalists about issues of concern in line with PEN's mission to defend freedom of expression and heighten awareness of censorship, oppression and imprisonment of writers and journalists around the world. Publication coincides with the Sydney Writers Festival in May and the International Day of the Imprisoned Writer in November. It is also distributed to festivals, bookshops and International PEN centres. The Sydney PEN Magazine is produced with the support of key sponsors, the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), and the Copyright Agency Limited (CAL) Cultural Fund.

In 2010, PEN launched a special project, *The Painted Chairs*, in order to draw attention to the plight of asylum seekers incarcerated by Australia in detention

centres. The project, launched at the Sydney Writers' Festival, brought together some of Australia's leading artists to create a celebration of freedom of expression. They included Cressida Campbell, Elisabeth Cummings, Ken Done, Michael Fitzjames, Nicholas Harding, Jasper Knight, Matthew Martin, Delma Montesin-McCausland, Reg Mombassa, Bruce Petty, Silke Raetze, Ann Thomson, John Shakespeare, Garry Shead and Gria Shead.

Other initiatives include publication of *The Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australia Literature* (2009), and the *3 Writers Project: Sydney PEN Voices*, initiated in 2007 and by which Sydney PEN commissioned a series of essays by leading Australian writers. They were compiled into three books: *Tolerance, Prejudice, Fear* (Christos Tsiolkas, Gideon Haigh, Alexis Wright); *Courage, Survival, Greed* (Anna Funder, Melissa Lucashenko, Christopher Kremmer), and *Honour, Risk, Legacy* (Malcolm Knox, Max Barry, Larissa Behrendt), published by Allen & Unwin. All were launched at public speaking events at the NSW State Library.

Following *3 Writers*, in 2012 PEN launched its Free Voices series of public talks to recognise The Day of the Imprisoned Writer on November 15. The series was designed to provide a space for the diverse perspectives of a range of writers to explore the concepts of "freedom to read, freedom to write, freedom to speak."

That year, investigative journalist and author Antony Loewenstein delivered the Free Voices address to the Sydney Writers' Festival; later that year, on The Day of the Imprisoned Writer, radio and television commentator Craig Reucassel delivered his talk at the NSW State Library. Other Free Voices events have been presented by academic and journalist Waleed Aly, jurist Michael Kirby, academic researcher Randa Abdel-Fattah, writer and columnist Anne Summers, academic and pioneering gay rights activist Dennis Altman, writer and playwright David Malouf, journalist Richard Ackland, president of International PEN Jennifer Clements, academic and Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations Gillian Triggs, and journalist Stan Grant. Many were delivered at the Sydney Writers' Festival.

A major initiative has been the promotion of the anthology, *A Country Too Far* edited by Tom Keneally and Rosie Scott, published 2013. One of the central moral issues of the time continues to be the question of asylum seekers, arguably the most controversial subject in Australia today. In this landmark anthology, twenty-seven of Australia's finest writers focused their intelligence and creativity on the theme of the dispossessed, bringing a whole new perspective of depth and truthfulness to what has become a fraught, distorted war of words. This anthology confirms that the experience of seeking asylum – the journeys of escape from death, starvation, poverty or terror to an imagined paradise – is deeply embedded in Australian culture and personal histories.

Literature knows no frontiers: 100 years protecting the freedom of expression

PEN International launched its centenary book *PEN International: An Illustrated History*, during the 87th PEN International Congress in September.

An *Illustrated History* presents PEN's journey and work on the promotion of literature and the protection of freedom of expression over the last 100 years. Published in nine languages to date, with more than 300 pages, 500 documents, including photographs, letters, posters and maps, the book celebrates writers, members, supporters and all those who, since its foundation in 1921, have spoken truth to power and urged governments to uphold the right to freedom of expression. It also provides a window to the reality of PEN's work today.

"The PEN book tells the extraordinary story of writers from all over the world who, for one hundred years, have worked to protect freedom of expression and uphold the unique revolutionary value of literature in the transformation of individual lives and societies," says Jennifer Clement, former PEN International President.

Produced as part of PEN International's Centenary celebrations, *An Illustrated History* takes the reader through the many moments and debates that shaped PEN's identity and sense of mission during a century.

The poet, novelist, feminist and internationalist Catharine Amy Dawson Scott created PEN in 1921 as a London club where both female and male writers could meet, no such club existed at that time. Within four years there were 25 PEN Centres in Europe, and by 1931 there were several Centres in South America and China.

Since its early days, PEN International embodied the mission to defend writers who were imprisoned for their use of the word, with Jacques Roumain, Ludwig Renn, Federico García Lorca and Arthur Koestler being the first writers in prison for whom PEN campaigned.

Other key moments include the creation of PEN's Committees - Writers in Prison (1960), Translation and Linguistic Rights (1978), Writers for Peace (1984), and Women Writers (1991),- with each committee approving several declarations and manifestos which define PEN's mission, including the Democracy of the Imagination Manifesto (2019), and the establishment of the PEN Emergency Fund (1971) which introduced support for writers in exile or those seeking asylum.

These milestones have enabled PEN to successfully connect writers, human rights defenders and community groups, celebrate literature, defend freedom of expression and linguistic diversity, and protect writers at risk, most recently imprisoned writers Sedigeh Vasmaghi (Iran), Paola Ugaz (Peru), Osman Kavala (Turkey), and Kakwenza Rukirabashaija (Uganda) in 2020.

"The book is a crossroads of narratives, building again and again the unity of PEN's presence in all cultural fronts where freedom of expression is at stake. Because, from its founding to the present day, PEN's goal remains the same: to foster tolerance and dialogue across cultures, languages and political affiliations, within and between nations," says Carles Torner, PEN Centenary Director.

From opposing book-burning and the persecution of writers in Nazi Germany, to supporting imprisoned writers across the world today, PEN has worked to safeguard against all kinds of censorship and self-censorship. The extraordinary writers who have been PEN cases include: Federico García Lorca, Stefan Zweig, Musine Kokalari, Wole Soyinka, Salman Rushdie, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Anna Politkovskaya, Hrant Dink and Svetlana Alexievich.

Those writers' voices, and those of the many others who have battled to uphold the opening phrase of PEN's Charter— "Literature knows no frontiers"—are still very much with us. Their fortitude has made PEN International the strong, vibrant, active movement it is today. Their stories are told in this book, illustrated by unique archive photographs and documents.

An Illustrated History was written by Ginevra Avalor, Jennifer Clement, Peter McDonald, Rachel Potter, Carles Torner and Laetitia Zecchinian, and edited by Carles Torner and Jan Martens. Published as part of PEN International's Centenary celebrations, *PEN International: An Illustrated History* is the extraordinary story of how PEN has placed the celebration of literature and the defense of free speech at the center of humanity's struggle against repression since 1921.

Three Iranian dissidents honoured by PEN

Three imprisoned Iranian dissidents, supported by Sydney PEN in an ongoing campaign, were declared recipients of the prestigious 2021 PEN/Barbey Freedom to Write Award by Pen America in October. They are writer-filmmaker Baktash Abtin, novelist-journalist Keyvan Bajan and author-critic Reza Khandan Mahabadi.

All three dissidents are members of the anti-censorship Iranian Writers Association (IWA) and are serving a collective 15.5 years on charges including endangering national security and “spreading propaganda.”

As Reza Khandan Mahabadi explains, the Iranian Writers’ Association has always issued statements according to its charter in regards to social events. The Iranian authorities used these statements to charge the three writers with “propaganda against the state”. The same charge was made because the IWA published an internal magazine for its members.

Two years ago, 10 members of IWA compiled a book about the history of IWA on its 50th anniversary. A small number of this book was published but the Ministry of Intelligence seized the books and declared as “propaganda against the state”.

Further, the authorities charged them for “assembly and collusion against national security” because they, and other members of the IWA, gathered for the annual pilgrimage of acknowledgement to the graves of poet Ahmad Shamlou and IWA members Mohammad Mokhtari and Mohammad Jafar Pouyandeh who were murdered in 1988.

Baktash Abtin, Keyvan Bajan, and Reza Khandan Mahabadi are embodiments of the spirit that animates the work of PEN. They are writers who are called not only to offer prose and ideas on a page, but to live fearlessly — and make personal sacrifices in service of the liberties that underpin free thought, art, culture.

“By taking up the mantle of leadership within Iran’s literary community, they have served as beacons for countless authors and thinkers whose ability to imagine, push boundaries, and challenge repression under the most dangerous conditions is fed by the knowledge that they do not stand alone,” says PEN America CEO Suzanne Nossel.

Their detention stems both from their public profiles as writers, as well as their work and advocacy against the state’s encroachments on free expression.

In April and May 2015, security forces raided Abtin, Bajan, and Khandan Mahabadi’s homes, seizing their written works and materials, and questioning each of them about their work. After a lull in investigations, the writers were summoned again and briefly detained in January 2019; in April and May 2019, a court heard the joint case, and they were each convicted of “colluding against national security” and “spreading propaganda.”

Abtin, Bajan, and Khandan Mahabadi’s imprisonments have had grave effects on their health, underscoring an acute need to rally around their releases and continue calls to free unjustly jailed political prisoners around the world.

All three were summoned to begin their sentences at Iran’s notoriously brutal Evin Prison in September 2020, amid the raging pandemic and despite COVID-19’s severe impact in Iranian prisons. (Evin Prison has captured global attention in recent weeks as the Iranian government launched an investigation following released footage exposing horrific conditions and abuses by its guards.)

Abtin contracted COVID-19 after five months at Evin, which developed into pneumonia. When Abtin was taken to a hospital ward briefly for treatment, authorities forcibly transferred him back to his prison quarters while he still showed symptoms, putting his cellmates at risk of contracting the virus. The writers have likewise been refused proper hospital treatment for other ailments. Such callousness has become routine in Iran’s prison system amidst the pandemic.

The PEN Freedom to Write Award is a powerful tool in PEN’s year-round efforts to end the persecution of writers and defend free expression, serving as a springboard for PEN’s multifaceted advocacy for the writers it honours.

Sandra Symons

A voice of optimism from behind bars

Right now, there are 70,000 students in prison in Turkey and one of them has been there for 28 years. İlhan Sami Çomak was 22, studying geography in Istanbul when he was arrested and charged with lighting a forest fire and being a member of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) in 1994.

İlhan Sami Çomak was tortured for 20 days and says that he eventually confessed to the charge under torture. He was given a life sentence. However, he has always denied all the charges, he has never been a member of the PKK or protested against the government, or spoken out about Kurdish language rights.

Ipek Özel, a lecturer in law at Mef University, has been visiting him regularly. She says “He was just a boy.” In 2007 the European Court of Human Rights ruled that his prosecution was unlawful.

In prison he read a lot, had discussions and dialogue with other prisoners and as a result started writing poetry. He has published nine books, including an autobiography. In 2018 he won the Sennur Sezer poetry prize. He told Ms Özel, “When I started writing poetry I knew that in prison they may capture my body but they will never be able to capture my soul, my imagination.” She says poetry opened a window for him and describes it as “a salvation for his soul”.

**Life, separated from the sun
There's no direction here
But there is a way out
Always, a way out.
- İlhan Sami Çomak**

Through PEN International, many of the world's great poets have written poems for İlhan and he responds with a poem, this way he has had poetic dialogues with the outside world. He writes about nature, rivers, his hometown, clouds, birds, love, longing and passion, many things he has not been able to see, touch or feel for the last 28 years.

He grew up in a Kurdish village in Eastern Turkey; his people are known for their storytelling skills. He tells Ipek Özel that he had a very rich childhood and when he feels down, he opens a chapter from his past in his mind.

He is sometimes criticised for not writing about Kurdish or political rights, torture or prison conditions but he prefers to write with a hopeful voice, Ms Özel says. “He never loses his optimism”.



İlhan Sami Çomak



One of regular protests in support of the poet

As he wrote to PEN Scotland, “I’ve tried, stubbornly, to be a good and hopeful person. To know that my voice has been heard outside shows me that I am on the right path. It is still true that good people find one another! You are a ladder for me. And I thank you all.”

İlhan Çomak is due for release in three years. He is currently in solitary confinement in Silivri Prison, Turkey's highest security facility. His only company is a small pet bird, his few possessions include a collection of feathers.

We thought the Internet would liberate us, but we are speaking to fewer people

This year, Salil Tripathi completed his second and final term after seven years as the chair of PEN International's Writers in Prison Committee. This is an excerpt from the address he made at a meeting of Writers in Prison Committee and International Cities of Refuge Network.

The theme of our meeting this year is Digital Dystopia. We had thought the Internet was going to liberate us. Instead, we are speaking to fewer people, mainly to those we agree with. Some mute voices they don't like and block those who they find to be hostile. And worldwide, the cult of intolerance increases, with the powerful seeking to silence, by cancelling those they disagree with, including getting them expelled and removed from social media. Donald Trump says reprehensible things, but should it be left to an oversight board, appointed by a corporation nobody elected, to decide if his views should be heard in public? Who gets to decide? Are companies our saviours or new censors?

I had a minor kerfuffle last year, when Twitter removed me from its platform for a bit more than two days, which showed how arbitrary power works. Wiser counsel prevailed, I was back, thanks to the noise many of you made. But it shows the perilously precarious nature of our freedoms. And I am entirely aware that compared to the cases we work on – from Belarus, Turkey, Vietnam, China, Nicaragua, Uganda, and many other places – what I experienced was farcical. They are the real heroes. And the powerful seek to silence them in far crueller ways. To expect companies to make reasonable judgments is naïve.

This, when we know we cannot rely on governments. We know civil society too which wants to de-platform views that may be reprehensible, but instead of challenging those, they want others to remove them from the public domain. The Internet enables that; this year, the centenary year of PEN we realise that we have to continue to walk. In the words of the great Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore, even if nobody listens to your call, walk alone.

We are lucky; we are together. And we have walked together. We must continue to do so.

Pandemic Thoughts

In my bleak moments I have sometimes wondered – if coronavirus did not exist, would governments have invented something similar? This sounds like one of the conspiracy theories about the pandemic spreading like the virus itself across the planet, but there is cruel logic to it. The pandemic has allowed governments to impose strict controls and restrictions on civil liberties.

We are effectively under house arrest, cannot meet others easily, cannot go out easily, and we are expected to be willing to be subject to surveillance and be monitored. We now follow new social norms such as wearing masks and keeping safe distance between us and others, and abide by rapidly changing rules about what we can do, with whom, and where.

The constantly changing signals, as in my former home, London, whether you can meet people in groups of six or 30, as in my new home, New York, whether to wear a mask or not, whether to eat in the patio or inside, or in the country where I was born, India, where the gap to be kept between two shots of the vaccine constantly shifts, depending less on science and more on the availability of the vaccines – these are all questions where decisions are made based on convenience, with a view to ensure compliance, with a view to demonstrate, as if in theatre, that somebody up there knows what is to be done and telling us how to do it and we play our parts to pretend as if everything is normal.

And when the government decides, sometimes by giving reasons, but sometimes on a whim, to impose lockdowns or time-bound curfews (as if the virus respects government strictures), again, we must comply.

It is all for good reasons, we are told. Liberties must not be curtailed. But we know that international human rights standards, such as the Siracusa Principles, do permit derogation of human rights in certain circumstances, such as grave threat to public health. However, those restrictions have to be legal, evidence-

based, necessary, proportional, and gradual. One thing we've learned in the past year and more is that while these restrictions are necessary and often legal, the evidence on which these are based is not always convincing.

Many governments believe in 'shock and awe,' and as such, the restrictions are no longer gradual. And they are certainly not proportional. Think of Rozina Islam, the reporter of the Bangladeshi daily, Prothom Alo (First Light), who has been arrested on Monday because she was seeking to write information about the government's handling of the pandemic.

Restricting a large number of people to meet in public may be necessary, but restricting journalists from reporting on that is not. Challenging conspiracy theories is essential, but jailing commentators or writers who question the authorities is not. Being transparent about government policy is crucial, but dismissing critics as purveyors of fake news, and worse, prosecuting them, is not. Journalists who have questioned that have tried to cast light, and today, some of those journalists are in jail.

And yet, as PEN International begins celebrating its centenary – albeit on a subdued note, given the pandemic and the impossibility for us to meet one another – it is worth remembering that no government wants to miss turning a crisis into an opportunity. We have seen this with armed conflict, where Israel bombed a building which had offices of Al Jazeera and the Associated Press;

Conflict allows many governments to impose restrictions that never go away. Myanmar is another example, where the Tatmadaw is imposing rules at will, and jailing, even killing writers, or forcing them into considering options to leave. This was most noticeable two decades ago, when after the attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001, the US and many other countries passed legislation that made dissent harder, and in the years since, even though the situation has improved, few governments have relinquished the controls they had acquired.

The pandemic poses a similar challenge. In the name of keeping us safe, healthy, and secure, governments will want to know more about whom we meet, where we meet, and for how long, and in the process find out what we might eat or drink, buy, and consume, because really what they want to know is what we think and what we might express – and how to stop us from doing it.

But we – writers, poets, playwrights, bloggers, artists, editors, and journalists – are made of sterner stuff. We like speaking truth to power. We say that the emperor is in his birthday suit, if he is without any clothes – because that is the truth, and people have the right to know. Parul Khakhar is a poet who writes in my mother tongue, Gujarati and wrote a dirge, outraged as she was when she saw dead bodies floating in the river Hindus consider holy, the Ganges. She is free, but has had to lock her social media account, and received vile abuse which is sexually explicit, misogynistic, and vulgar. She is a spunky woman, but she, and others like her, should never feel they are alone.

The pandemic poses a similar challenge. In the name of keeping us safe, healthy, and secure, governments will want to know more about whom we meet, where we meet, and for how long, and in the process find out what we might eat or drink, buy, and consume, because really what they want to know is what we think and what we might express – and how to stop us from doing it.



Salil Tripathi

Some of us may say what we wish through imagination and fiction; some of us write poetry about it; some present a harrowing account that moves from journalism to the realm of literature; and some of us use newer modes of communication – through social media, through blogs – to widen our audiences. And we create a community – of writers and readers who care for each other, who support each other, and believe in everyone's right to peaceful and free expression, regardless of their origin – their passport (or not), language, religion (or none), ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, indigeneity. Those in authority – governments, religions, corporations, and others who wield power – don't like that. They threaten the stubborn among us. They prosecute such outspoken writers, intimidate them, jail them, torture them, and sometimes kill them.

Global battle over Internet regulation has major implications for human rights

Freedom on the Net 2021 finds that while some democratic governments have made good-faith attempts to regulate the technology industry, state intervention in the digital sphere worldwide has contributed to the 11th consecutive year of global decline in internet freedom.

Governments around the world are increasingly asserting their authority over technology platforms, forcing businesses to comply with censorship and surveillance and contributing to an 11th consecutive year of global decline in internet freedom, according to Freedom on the Net 2021, the annual country-by-country assessment of internet freedom released in September by Freedom House.

Global norms shifted dramatically toward greater state intervention in the digital sphere over the past year. Of the 70 states covered by Freedom on the Net 2021, 48 pursued legal or administrative action against technology companies. Some measures reflected legitimate attempts to mitigate online harms, rein in misuse of data, or end manipulative market practices.

Many governments, however, proposed new policies that obliged businesses to remove content and share personal data with authorities, at great cost to free expression, privacy, and public accountability.

This change in the balance of power between companies and states has come amid a historic crackdown on freedom of expression online. In 56 countries, officials arrested or convicted people for their online speech.

Governments suspended internet access in at least 20 countries, and 21 states blocked access to social media platforms, most often during times of political turmoil such as protests and elections. Authorities in at least 45 countries are suspected of obtaining sophisticated spyware or data-extraction technology from private vendors.

“The rights of internet users around the world, especially the rights to free expression and privacy, are being massively violated as a result of recent state actions,” said Michael J. Abramowitz, president of Freedom House. “Instead of using regulation to curb the immense power of tech companies, many governments are wielding it for their own repressive purposes.”

The decision by several platforms to deactivate the accounts of outgoing US president Donald Trump — in the wake of the January 6 assault on the Capitol — intensified concerns about the arbitrary power of

a few firms to shape political debate, as well as their responsibility to stem offline violence.

The move sparked a plethora of new regulatory and legislative proposals, including bad-faith attempts to prevent companies from moderating the accounts of politicians and state-run media. Tech companies faced high-profile showdowns with illiberal and authoritarian leaders in India, Nigeria, Russia, and Turkey that will have global implications for the future of free expression online.

“In these high-stakes battles between governments and tech companies, human rights risk becoming the main casualties,” said Adrian Shahbaz, director for technology and democracy at Freedom House. “Given the examples to date, you can hardly blame people for being skeptical that government regulation will lead to greater protection of their rights online. Regulations should ensure that power does not accumulate in the hands of a few dominant actors, whether in government or the private sector.”

Internet freedom plummeted by 14 points in Myanmar — the largest annual decline ever recorded on Freedom on the Net’s 100-point scale — after the military refused to accept the results of the November 2020 general elections and launched a deadly coup in February 2021.

Electoral disputes also led to major internet freedom declines in Belarus, where authoritarian incumbent Alyaksandr Lukashenka claimed victory in a fraudulent presidential election in August 2020, and Uganda, where authorities shut off the internet and blocked social media platforms during marred general elections in January 2021.

In addition, officials in both Myanmar and Belarus sought to silence independent online media by shutting down news outlets and harassing, assaulting, and torturing online journalists.

“Governments everywhere are invoking a vague need to retake control of the internet—whether from foreign powers, multinational corporations, or even civil society,” said Adrian Shahbaz. “In the absence



Illustration by Mitch Blunt

of a shared vision for a free and open internet, many states are imposing restrictions on the free flow of information across borders, denying people access to life-changing tools based solely on their location. This fragmentation is diminishing the emancipatory power of the internet.”

According to Allie Funk, senior research analyst for technology and democracy at Freedom House, “The daunting complexity of internet regulation makes it all the more important for democracies to take the lead and set a high bar by introducing regulatory approaches that protect human rights online and preserve a free and open internet.

“The laissez-faire approach to the tech industry spurred some forms of innovation, but it has also created opportunities for authoritarian manipulation, data exploitation, and widespread malfeasance. Democratic governments should pursue well-crafted regulations that tackle these problems while protecting people’s rights to express themselves, share information across borders, and hold the powerful to account.”

Here are the key findings of the Freedom on the Net 2021:

Global internet freedom declined for the 11th consecutive year. The greatest deteriorations were documented in Myanmar, Belarus, and Uganda, where state forces cracked down amid electoral and constitutional crises. Myanmar’s 14-point score decline is the largest registered since the Freedom on the Net project began.

Governments clashed with technology companies on users’ rights. Authorities in at least 48 countries pursued new rules for tech companies on content, data, and competition over the past year. With a few

positive exceptions, the push to regulate the tech industry, which stems in some cases from genuine problems like online harassment and manipulative market practices, is being exploited to subdue free expression and gain greater access to private data.

Free expression online is under unprecedented strain. More

governments arrested users for nonviolent political, social, or religious speech than ever before. Officials suspended internet access in at least 20 countries, and 21 states

blocked access to social media platforms. Authorities in at least 45 countries are suspected of obtaining sophisticated spyware or data-extraction technology from private vendors.

China ranks as the worst environment for internet freedom for the seventh year in a row. Chinese authorities imposed draconian prison terms for online dissent, independent reporting, and mundane daily communications. The COVID-19 pandemic remains one of the most heavily censored topics. Officials also cracked down on the country’s tech giants, citing their abuses related to competition and data protection, though the campaign further concentrated power in the hands of the authoritarian state.

The United States’ score declined for the fifth consecutive year. False, misleading, and manipulated information continued to proliferate online, even affecting public acceptance of the 2020 presidential election results. The new administration took promising steps to enforce stronger protections for internet users.

State intervention must protect human rights online and preserve an open internet. To counter digital authoritarianism, democracies should ensure that regulations enable users to express themselves freely, share information across borders, and hold the powerful to account.

Freedom House is founded on the core conviction that freedom flourishes in democratic nations where governments are accountable to their people. Founded in 1941, it is a non-profit, non-governmental organisation in Washington, D.C., that conducts research and advocacy on democracy, political freedom, and human rights.



Make a difference, join us

Sydney PEN is a branch of PEN International, a worldwide organisation which defends free expression, protects writers at risk, support writers in exile, promotes linguistic rights and promotes the written word in all its forms.

Membership fees ensure our survival as a branch as well as support the PEN international initiative. You will also be the first to hear about our events and campaigns.

Sydney PEN was founded in 1931 and over the years our organisation has boasted many prominent Australian writers as part of its membership including Thomas Keneally and the late Rosie Scott.

Join Sydney PEN or renew membership online:

<https://pen.org.au/collections/membership>

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