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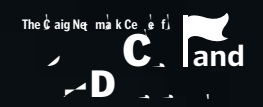
Strategies for good journalism
when sources dismiss the press

Written by Fernanda Camarena and Mel Grau
Edited by Neil Brown and Jennifer Orsi

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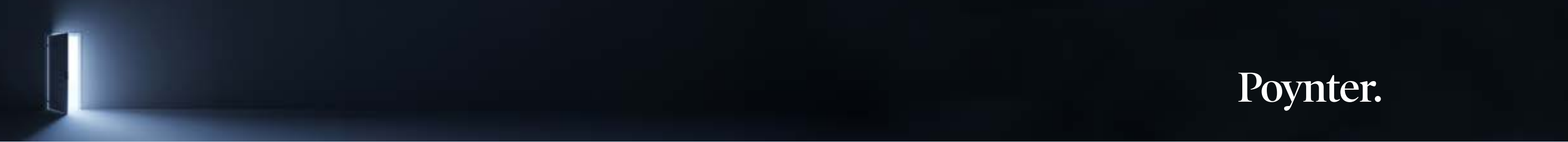


At the Poynter Institute, we have been collecting examples, talking with professionals and contemplating strategies to stem this erosion of access that undermines

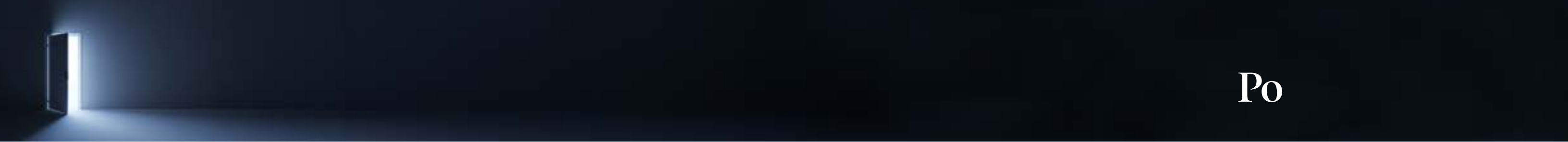
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do so.”

Lash’s team covered the event without entering the hotel. They interviewed people outside the event, which was eventually livestreamed so they could view what was said.

Because of several factors, including the 24/7 cable news cycle and social media, reluctant public figures can avoid journalists but still reach a receptive audience.

Sergio Bustos, vice president of news for WLRN South Florida Public Media, said newsmakers know their audience “and tend to gravitate toward a friendly journalist or host and avoid those that they deem ‘hostile’ or who would challenge them.”

He added, ominously: “I don’t think the public cares. They, I believe, compound the problem because they are tuning in or clicking on TV or digital news outlets that lean heavily toward their political point of view. MSNBC (liberal). Fox News

“Many have written off the media as left-wing and biased. In many ways, they shut off media and instead only grant interviews to outlets that support their political views.”

Hollis R. Towns
vice president of content and editor-in-chief of the
Alabama Media Group

(conservative).”

Hollis R. Towns, a longtime newspaper news executive who is now vice president of content and editor-in-chief of the Alabama Media Group, has a similar view regarding cable news. Towns said newsmakers often believe the media is unfair and out to get them. “Many have written off the media as left-wing and biased,” he said. “In many ways, they shut off media and instead only grant interviews to

outlets that support their political views.”

April Schi , a political consultant and president of Strategic Solutions of Florida, as well as an elected Republican Party committeewoman in Tampa, agreed that some newsmakers lack trust in the media. Because they have the tools and methods to engage with the audience, Schi said they have become comfortable working without traditional media.

“Officials can now launch their own messages on multiple platforms to reach constituents and the public within minutes and achieve a wider, more controlled message delivery,” she said.

She added that pay-to-play platforms allow for direct publication of a specific communication with little chance of editing or altering the original message.

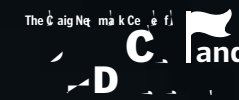
What is a reporter to do in this evolving new world of limited access? While sources may attempt to seize control of their narrative, journalists still have plenty of options at their disposal to keep their audiences informed and sources accountable.

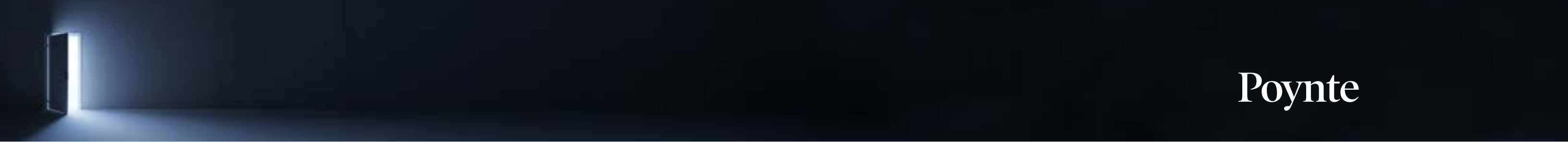
The strongest points of consensus at Poynter’s symposium were recommendations that centered on a recommitment to good beat reporting: getting out of the office and building personal relationships with sources, ensuring the source

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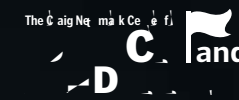


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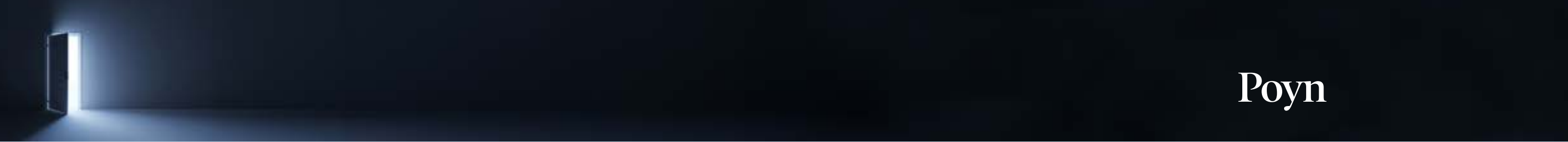
II. Open records:

A guide to help the owner — the public — have access

On March 16, 2020, the first
Chicagoan died from COVID-19.

Using information from the daily
Cook County medical examiner's
report, newsrooms identified the
victim, a 61-year-old retired nurse.

[WBEZ published a story](#) yabor ccehTJ0.306 Tc -7.57/Plac04i ed nr sis (e)-10 ()TJ8 (t(f)13.7 (m)-2.i)3.6 diig



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Before the pandemic, reporters were allowed onto the floor of the New York State Assembly. They could approach lawmakers during downtime and ask questions about lengthy proposals and sticking points. They could go behind the speaker podium to witness informal gaggles or access additional meeting rooms.

Pandemic lockdowns relegated journalists to a few seats in the back of the chamber.

Now four years later — despite formal requests from the New York State Legislative Correspondents Association and a [rules change request](#) from state Republicans to reinstate press access — the Democratic supermajority still denies reporters physical access in the lower house. Mask requirements, capacity restrictions and other limitations related to health and

safety have long been lifted.

Assembly Speaker Carl Heastie’s [comms team has also denied](#) any change occurred at all, arguing that reporters had never been allowed on the floor.

“Many of my fellow statehouse reporters used the term ‘gaslighting’ to describe this situation,” said Rebecca Lewis, senior state politics reporter at City & State New York. “We tried time and again to get our

access restored. ... We even had longtime journalists who covered the institution provide photos of them talking to lawmakers on the floor.”

According to the [Press Freedom Tracker](#), state governments in Iowa, Kansas, Utah and Texas also delayed lifting pandemic-era restrictions on reporter access until 2022 and 2023.

Meanwhile, [Pittsburgh Public Schools and other entities](#) in

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not be used to being blocked from press conferences and public meetings, journalists in other areas, like sports and entertainment, have long dealt with tightly controlled physical access to their sources and strict rules of engagement.

In September 2023, the University of Southern California [suspended](#) Orange County Register beat reporter Luca Evans from USC football facilities and press conferences, arguing he violated a policy of reporting remarks made outside official team media availability. USC and head coach Lincoln Riley upheld the suspension after a letter from the media group's top editors, even though they could not point to the specific policy that was broken or back up any claims of inaccurate reporting.

"It is extremely difficult to gain access to many newsmakers, particularly the ones in sports that I need to speak with to do my job," said Don Van Natta Jr., ESPN

investigative reporter. "Nearly all the sources I try to reach are tightly controlled by handlers, like agents and PR execs."

The Tampa Bay Times' Garcia says his approach to grassroots sourcing can also be beneficial for journalists who are denied access to physical spaces, because a community member might be able to enter, take notes, record audio or even ask questions on a journalist's behalf.

Van Natta said that for him, a "combination of persistence and stubbornness" typically also yields success.

Recommendation: Collaborate rather than compete

Another strategy is to put competitive instincts aside.

Klas, the former Florida capitol reporter, and Lewis, the New York statehouse reporter, discussed how they started asking competitors

who are present at an event or press conference for help — or to at least share a recording or transcript from a tool like Otter.

"I'll say, 'If you get a question in, here are some things we're interested in.' I'll put my questions on Twitter, and I'll say, 'Here's what you should be asking.' It's worked!" Klas said. "I think it would be a really good thing if there was more cooperation, collaboration, like if there was an email chain or a WhatsApp chain of reporters that were covering the same thing."

In the way that the White House press corps creates pool reports to "[balance reporting needs with logistical realities](#)," local journalists could collaborate with each other to share updates on key newsmakers' activities.

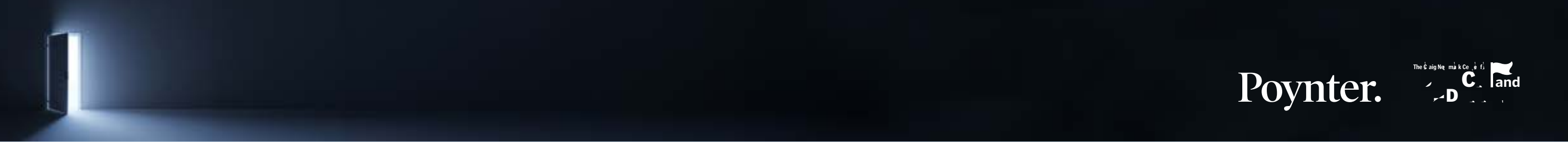
If someone in the New York legislative correspondents association "is able to make a particular event and no one else is, they'll send an untelevised gaggle,"

The COVID-19 pandemic halted the practice of building relationships face to face. And the deepening political polarization in which newsmakers have increasingly vilified journalists with whom they disagree has also served as a deterrent for journalists to venture to places that may now seem unsafe.

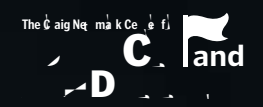
Attendees at Poynter's ethics symposium discussed how the COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally altered the practice of journalism, from the proliferation of remote and hybrid workplaces to the fracturing of in-person relationships.

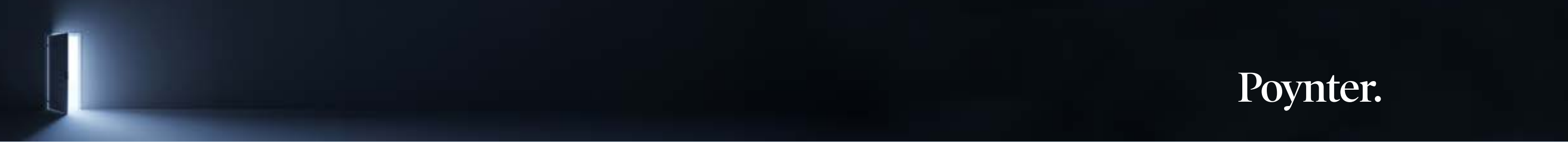
"Legislators and other elected officials got used to the fact that we weren't in their face anymore, or we weren't even showing up," Klas said. "And so there's been a behavioral shift that signals they don't really want reporters — especially those with hard questions — to come."

Mesfin Fekadu, senior music editor at The Hollywood Reporter and former entertainment reporter at The Associated Press, saw the behavioral shift among journalists, too: "The pandemic allowed a lot of us to do our jobs at home, and it can be very comfortable. You can report from your computer as much as



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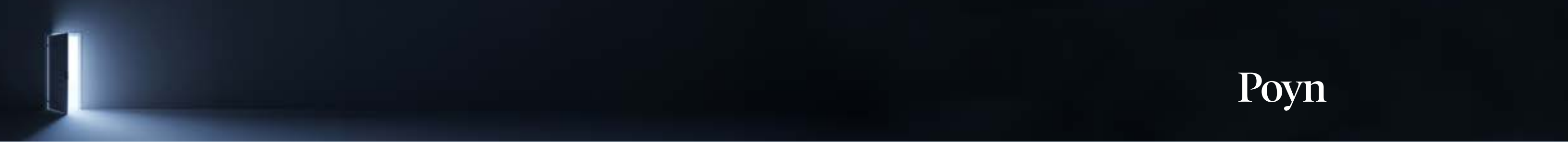


to improve people’s lives. That will ultimately be the thing that gets our audience to care, and will keep us relevant to citizens and to sources,” he said. “We have to find ways, as we’ve laid out in this report, to keep pushing to tell complete and fair stories.”

Join the discussion and share your experiences with or questions about resistant sources with us at sources@poynter.org for potential use in a future poynter.org article.

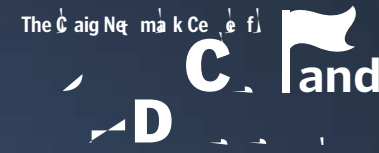


Journalists at Poynter’s ethics symposium in 2023 discuss strategies to develop better source relationships, even amid the challenges of shrinking budgets and staffs.



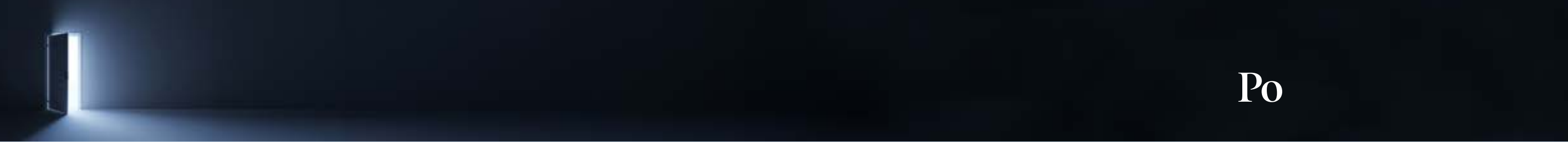
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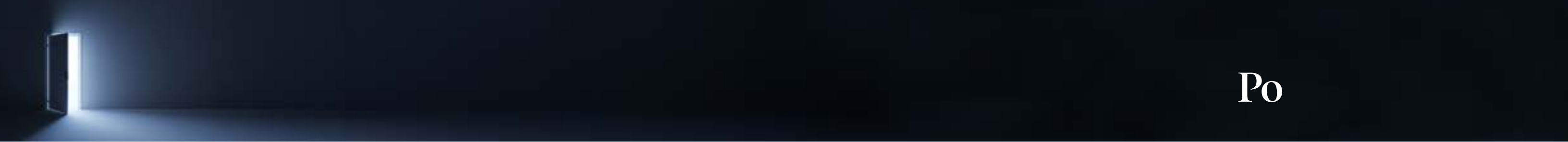


JOURNALISTS' TOOLKIT

Accurate reporting when sources shut down



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