

STORIES THAT MATTER IN TOUGH TIMES

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By Kelly Toughill,

[The Toronto Star](#), 13 December 2008

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Kelly Toughill, a former Star journalist, is an associate professor in the School of Journalism at the University of King's College, Halifax. Former U.S. president Jimmy Carter called them "a glorious parade of heroes."

Journalists aren't called heroes very often, but Carter was right. The 29 men and women who gathered here last week for an international media award are heroes. Each used truth to make the world a better place, most without any expectation of reward.

These are horrible times for people who care about journalism. Last week alone, the company that owns the Los Angeles Times and the Chicago Tribune filed for bankruptcy protection, the New York Times mortgaged its headquarters to pay the bills and Time Canada shut down.

The Every Human Has Rights Media Awards were a timely reminder that the practice of journalism has rarely been easy or comfortable, that it is still a struggle in many parts of the world, and that it is worth the effort. (Full disclosure: I played a small role as part of a panel that judged North American entries.)

The awards were sponsored by The Elders, a group of senior statesmen put together by Nelson Mandela and bankrolled by musician Peter Gabriel and British mogul Richard Branson. The Elders include such international heavyweights as Carter, who won the Nobel Peace Prize, former Irish President Mary Robinson, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan.

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best help the world, one of the first things they chose to do was to encourage the telling of stories that matter.

Some believe that media of all kinds are now passé, that not only newspapers, but television, magazines and online blogs and zines are no longer needed in an era of direct communication.

The award website shows how wrong they are. The winners came from every continent and worked in every type of media. Some examples:

- Raby Idoumou Bou broke regional taboos to write about a 9-year-old girl abducted in Mauritania and sold into marriage in Saudi Arabia. She was returned after his story was published online.
- Fatima Baptista documented on Brazilian television how poor settlers in the Amazon are killed for their land, and how authorities refuse to help.
- Raghu Karnard wrote a story for Tehelka Magazine about the toxic legacy of the Union Carbide explosion in Bhopal, India.
- Jonathon Eyler-Werve documented Internet censorship in the United States.
- Benjamin Barthe chronicled organized smuggling in the Palestinian territories for Le Monde.
- Anas Aremeyaw and Mary Fianko Akuffo exposed a human trafficking ring that was exporting young girls from Ghana to Europe with the help of corrupt immigration officials.

It wasn't just the breadth of story topics that was inspirational, but the story forms themselves, which ranged from investigative series in traditional newspapers to editorials produced in the online virtual reality game Second Life.

And then there were the back stories, the tales of how hard the journalists worked to get the truth. The team from Ghana spent eight months undercover to expose the human smuggling ring. Najah Mutlaq Alotaibi wrote about how Saudi Arabian women are denied the right to study overseas by laws that force them to travel with a male guardian. Alotaibi was the only winner not present in Paris; she herself was banned from travel by a Saudi law that required she get permission for the trip from a male relative.

The award was set up to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, but the stories were not written in the service of a document. None of the stories carried that deadly whiff of earnest propaganda that clings to tales concocted to serve a higher purpose. The journalists honoured in Paris were not human rights workers. They were, they are, truth workers.

The ceremony was confirmation in the midst of our shifting media universe that one thing has not changed. The world still needs stories that matter.

