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Dear Judges:

Covering a war from the field involves countless ethical decisions, some instinctive and immediate, some born of years of experience, and others that we revisit endlessly, hoping time will prove we've made the right choice.

For almost three weeks, the Associated Press team of videojournalist Mstyslav Chernov, photographer Evgeniy Maloletka and video producer Vasilisa Stepanenko were the last international journalists [in the besieged Ukrainian city of Mariupol](#). Trapped in the city amid constant shelling and bombing as Russian forces closed in, their work became such a flashpoint that [Russia started hunting them down, with names on a list](#).

Their mission to publish both breaking news and broader stories in a war context raised agonizing questions of how much help to offer, how much to accept.

As his camera rolled, residents begged Chernov for advice on where to go, what to do. With communications severed, a woman asked Maloletka to publish a photo of her so her family outside would know she still lived. And crowds of people pleaded for news from outside Mariupol.

Each time, the team made the decision to keep filming, keep shooting — and then to put the cameras down and help as best they could. Their knowledge of Mariupol's bomb shelters helped direct people to safety.

But, more than anything, their decision to keep taking photos and video around the city — even when people were furious with them for being seen in horrible conditions — served a greater purpose. The team believed that publishing the raw truth about Mariupol would have more effect than any individual act of kindness.

After getting out his videos, Chernov would speak to investigative reporter Lori Hinnant by phone. Their collaboration led to a [story that stands out in the proudest tradition of war dispatches](#), with a punch-to-the-gut first line:

“The bodies of the children all lie here, dumped into this narrow trench hastily dug into the frozen earth of Mariupol to the constant drumbeat of shelling.”

Then came an even more difficult decision: How much help to accept. The team took a police officer up on his offer to escort them after curfew to the only place in the city where they could get a signal and get the images out.

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In the words of Chernov: “I have never, ever felt that breaking the silence was so important.”

Thirty-six hours later, the next decision was upon them. This one they had just moments to consider, but a career’s worth of experience lay behind it. A squad of Ukrainian soldiers had been sent behind front lines to extract them from the hospital where they sheltered with hundreds of patients and dozens of doctors. Accept the help, abandon all the people in the hospital — and ultimately Mariupol — or stay and chronicle events as they unfold?

“If they catch you, they will get you on camera and they will make you say that everything you filmed is a lie,” their police officer pleaded with them. “All your efforts and everything you have done in Mariupol will be in vain.”

They left. [The riveting story of the journalists’ escape from Mariupol](#), as told in the first-person by Chernov to Hinnant, whom he has known for years, is deeply moving.

It is no exaggeration to say that their reporting went worldwide, drawing attention to atrocities that would otherwise have gone largely unnoticed. Mariupol’s deputy mayor wrote the AP a letter that said the team’s reporting prompted the international community to put enough pressure on Russia to open humanitarian corridors. They “saved thousands of civilian lives of Mariupol,” Petro Andriushchenko said, as a “direct result of their brave work.”

“It is difficult to overestimate your personal contribution here,” he wrote.

As they finally escaped, through 15 Russian checkpoints, Stepanenko wore and smuggled through a tampon embedded with [a tiny data card with exclusive footage from a Ukrainian medic](#), Yuliia Paievskia. (Stepanenko’s name was withheld from the early reporting for her safety.)

The medic, better known as Taira, was captured by Russia days after entrusting the team with her footage. Taira then appeared on Russian television, bruised and seemingly drugged.

As negotiations faltered to win her release, the AP team weighed how releasing the video would affect Taira, discussing the issue repeatedly among themselves and with her husband. Would releasing the video endanger her further or help win her release? How to handle a Russian propaganda interview with her that was clearly not given freely?

Ultimately, as we got confirmation from Ukrainian sources that negotiations had stalled, we went ahead. [The resulting story and video undermined the Russian narrative](#) that Taira was a far-right fighter rather than a medic. Our reporting showed her caring for Russian soldiers as well as Ukrainians and treating children dying of wounds inflicted by Russian forces.

[Russia freed her from custody](#), for which she personally credited the AP.

“You got this flash drive out and I thank you,” she said to the AP in Kyiv. [“Because of you, I could leave this hell.”](#)

Taira also played [the AP video in her testimony to the U.S. Congress](#) about her ordeal, shared by many others in Russian custody.

Mariupol is at the heart of this team’s work, standing out as a microcosm of everything Russia has done to Ukraine. But it was far from the only work they did.

When Russian forces were driven from the eastern city of Iziium in September, Stepanenko, Maloletka and Hinnant set out to uncover the truth about life under nearly six months of occupation. They arrived in Iziium before it was cleared of mines and ahead even of war crimes investigators, while shelling was still happening. [They located 10 torture sites, including one in a kindergarten, and gained access to five.](#)

Upon the advice of Stepanenko’s relative, they visited a monastery, where they found a terrified Ukrainian soldier in hiding without any identity documents. His family thought he was dead. The AP team was traveling back and forth from the city of Kharkiv daily at that point, and weighed the soldier’s fervent desire for help against the high risk that without documents, he would be detained by Ukrainian forces as a deserter or spy. In the end, the reporting itself accomplished what the monks could not: [The AP verified his identity and put him back in touch with family, friends – and his unit.](#)

The work of the AP team of Chernov, Maloletka, Stepanenko and Hinnant has been unrivalled in getting out to the world a story Russia desperately wanted to hide. That accomplishment was possible only because of the ethical choices they made – decisions that the passage of time has born out in the months since.

We could not be more proud to nominate Mstyslav Chernov, Evgeniy Maloletka, Vasilisa Stepanenko and Lori Hinnant for the Anthony Shadid Award for Journalism Ethics.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Julie Pace". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. The first name "Julie" is written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "Pace".

Julie Pace
Executive Editor
The Associated Press

Name and contact information of the nominators:

- Mary Rajkumar – Deputy Editor for International Investigations
mrajkumar@ap.org



Names and emails of the reporter or reporting team that produced the report

- Mstyslav Chernov - mchernov@ap.org
- Evgeniy Maloletka - maloletkaphoto@gmail.com
- Vasilisa Stepanenko - vstepanenko_news@ap.org
- Lori Hinnant – lhinnant@ap.org

Top three stories for consideration:

1. 20 days in Mariupol: The team that documented city's agony
2. Captive medic's bodycam shows firsthand horror of Mariupol
3. 10 torture sites in 1 town: Russia sowed pain, fear in Izium

Note of gratitude from Petro Andriushchenko, an advisor to the mayor of Mariupol

Dear Madam Julie Pace
Madam Mary Rajkumar
Mr. Ron Nixon

I am writing to you to express my great gratitude for the AP team's work during the Russian occupation of Mariupol. Recently, while I'd cooperated with AP team about Mariupol I was very surprised that they didn't know nothing about the direct result of their brave work, such as the final point in the negotiations between the Ukrainian authorities and the representatives of Russia, which allowed them to finally start the evacuation and, as a result, saved thousands of civilian lives of Mariupol.

Despite the previous results and resonance in Word media, only photo and truth information received from Mariupol from your team made the revolution in word p politics that provided the necessary pressure from the international community, which forced the Russians to provide Mariupol residents with a way to evacuate.

I would like to express admiration and sincere gratitude to you and your team on behalf of the Mariupol local authorities, myself and all Mariupol residents. Without exaggeration, you saved several tens of thousands of civilians, and it is difficult to overestimate your personal contribution here.

Thank you for your patience and cooperation. Please accept my sincere gratitude.

- Adviser of Mariupol's mayor Petro Andriushchenko

Шановні пані Julie Pace Mary Rajkumar та пан Ron Nixon

Я пишу вам аби висловити щирю вдячність за роботу мужньої команди АР, яка висвітлювала події з Маріуполя під час російської окупації. Нещодавно співпрацюючи знов я несподівано дізнався, що ані ви, ані ваша команда не в курсі про надважливий вклад вашої роботи. Який поставив фінальну точку в перемовинах між Україною та росією в питанні дозволу на евакуацію цивільних осіб з Маріуполя.

Незважаючи на достатньо великий міжнародний резонанс навколо Маріуполя, саме публікація правдивих фотографій та інформації безпосередньо з Маріуполя під час подій, кардинально змінили міжнародну політику. Саме це забезпечило міжнародний тиск на росію, змусивши росіян відкрити шлях для евакуації цивільних громадян.

Без перебільшення це врятувало десятки тисяч маріупольців від циничного вбивства росіянами.

Хочу від імені Маріупольської законої української влади, від себе особисто та від імені всіх врятованих маріупольців висловити щирю вдячність вам та вашій команді за це. Складно переоцінити важливість та результати цієї роботи.

З великою вдячністю

- Радник міського голови м. Маріуполя Петро Андрющенко