



# The Silencing Crime: Sexual Violence and Journalists

*A special report by the Committee to Protect Journalists*



Committee to Protect Journalists

## The Silencing Crime: Sexual Violence and Journalists

Few cases of sexual assault against journalists have ever been documented, a product of powerful cultural and professional stigmas. But now dozens of journalists are coming forward to say they have been sexually abused in the course of their work. **A CPJ special report by Lauren Wolfe**



Chaotic public events are often the setting for sexual abuse of journalists. CBS correspondent Lara Logan was assaulted at this political demonstration in Cairo. (AP/Khalil Hamra)

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### NEW YORK

Nine years passed before Colombian journalist Jineth Bedoya spoke publicly about the brutal rape she endured while reporting on right-wing paramilitaries in May 2000. On assignment for the Bogotá daily *El Espectador*, Bedoya was abducted, bound, blindfolded, and taken to a house in the central city of Villavicencio, where she was savagely beaten and raped by multiple attackers.

Since she began speaking out, Bedoya said, she has encountered a number of journalists—from Colombia to the United States to Europe—who had been raped or sexually abused but chose to stay quiet because of cultural and professional stigmas. By making her own case more visible, Bedoya said, she hopes to encourage these journalists to “denounce what’s happened to them and be able to ask for justice.”

The 2000 attack on Bedoya was notable in another respect: The assault was reported to authorities and CPJ documented it at the time, making it one of the relatively few recorded cases of sexual assault against a journalist.

Now, the vicious sexual assault of CBS correspondent Lara Logan in Cairo in February has brought the issue into sharp focus, prompting journalists worldwide to begin speaking out in numbers previously unknown. Over the past four months, CPJ has interviewed more than four dozen journalists who have undergone varying degrees of sexual violence—from rape by multiple attackers to aggressive groping—either in retaliation for their work or during the course of their reporting. They include 27 local journalists, from top editors to beat reporters, working in regions from the Middle East to South Asia, Africa to the Americas. Five described being brutally raped, while others reported various levels of sexual assault, aggressive physical harassment, and threats of sexual violence. A similar range of experience was reported by 25 international journalists; two reported being raped, five others described serious sexual violation—ranging from violent, sexual touching, to penetration by hands—and 22 said they had been groped multiple times. Most of the reported attacks occurred within the past five years, although a small number of cases date back as far as two decades.



Bedoya says speaking out has given voice to others. (Reuters)

Many of the assaults fall into three general types: targeted sexual violation of specific journalists, often in reprisal for their work; mob-related sexual violence against journalists covering public events; and sexual abuse of journalists in detention or captivity. Although women constitute the large majority of victims overall, male journalists have also been victimized, most often while in captivity or detention.

Most of the individuals interviewed by CPJ have not previously disclosed their experiences beyond speaking with friends or family. Journalists from all over the world said they largely kept assaults to themselves because of broad cultural stigmas and a lack of faith that authorities would act upon their complaints. But time and again, journalists also said that professional considerations played an important role; many were reluctant to disclose an assault to their editors for fear they would be perceived as vulnerable and be denied future assignments.

As a result, little documentation exists on the topic of sexual aggression against journalists. While CPJ and other international groups have reported individual instances of sexual assault over the years, the kind of methodological research that charts other anti-press attacks, such as murders and imprisonments, has yet to be conducted.

Whatever level of sexual aggression exists, advocates say, it raises compelling press freedom and security concerns. “If we want to make journalists safe and effective, make it possible for them to do their job safely and effectively, we can only do that by confronting honestly the real risks that are present,” said Bruce Shapiro, executive director of the Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma, which provides support and guidance in the coverage of traumatic events. “It requires an honest assessment by news organizations and the profession. We’re

talking, in fact, about strengthening the profession.”

To solicit reports for this account, CPJ contacted 15 international and local journalist groups throughout the world and asked that they put affected colleagues in touch with us. CPJ also contacted more than 20 individual journalists worldwide, asking that they do the same. The information gathered for this report, while giving insight into a largely unexplored area of the profession, will also provide a foundation for a long-range survey that CPJ will undertake in the coming year.

In conjunction with the publication of this report, CPJ is also publishing an addendum to its existing security guide, focusing on ways to minimize the risk of sexual assault.

## **Attacks of all types, occurring across the world**

Jenny Nordberg, a New York-based Swedish correspondent, was in Pakistan in October 2007 to cover the return of Benazir Bhutto, the exiled former prime minister who would be assassinated two months later. During a chaotic procession in Karachi that day, Nordberg became separated from her colleagues and surrounded by a crowd of men who sexually assaulted her. She was freed only after people in a passing truck pulled her to safety. She told CPJ why she chose not to talk about it until now:

“It’s embarrassing, and you feel like an idiot saying anything, especially when you are reporting on much, much greater horrors,” Nordberg wrote to CPJ in February. “But it still stays with you. I did not tell the editors for fear of losing assignments. That was definitely part of it. And I just did not want them to think of me as a girl. Especially when I am trying to be equal to, and better than, the boys. I may have told a female editor though, had I had one.”

Without support, Nordberg said, she turned a critical eye on herself.

“I did that whole thing of ‘Um, I was an idiot not to have proper backup, I was maybe not wearing the right thing, etcetera’ Today, when I am older and a little wiser, I know that crowds or riots are incredibly dangerous regardless of what you wear and even if you’re surrounded by ex-paratroopers. But I didn’t know then, and I was perfectly appropriately dressed, too, by the way. I also did not tell [editors] for fear that they may have any of those same thoughts, ‘Oh, maybe she invited that sort of behavior.’”

Male journalists have also been targeted, typically in situations of captivity or detention. Umar Cheema, a prominent political reporter for Pakistan’s largest English-language newspaper, *The News*, told CPJ that he was abducted, tortured, and sexually assaulted in an Islamabad suburb in September 2010. “As I was stripped naked and being tortured on the back with my head down totally blindfolded, the ringleader directed one of his fellows to molest me,” Cheema wrote in an email to CPJ, describing how he was sodomized with a wooden pole. “Ten minutes after I was free, I started thinking about what I should do,” he said. “The decision was I had to speak up.” Speaking out, he said, “has made me stronger and made my enemies more cowardly. Their efforts to intimidate me backfired.” Cheema has publicly blamed Pakistan’s powerful Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate for the abduction and subsequent abuse, an assertion the government denies.

Other male media workers have been victimized in captivity, although they face powerful disincentives to speaking out publicly. One international reporter told CPJ that a male Iraqi staff member in the journalist’s

Baghdad bureau was kidnapped and repeatedly raped because he worked for a Western news outlet. But the Iraqi staffer felt unable to report the matter to police or speak publicly for fear of being shamed, said the international reporter, who spoke on condition of anonymity to protect the staffer's identity.

A number of journalists have been sexually assaulted in official detention. Egyptian blogger Mohammed al-Sharkawi was sodomized in May 2006, when he was 24. His lawyer, Gamal Eid, said no one has been prosecuted for the abuse. CPJ also received secondhand reports that four Iranian journalists, two male and two female, were raped in custody. The use of rape to humiliate and control detainees in Iranian prisons has been widely documented.

Sexual aggression on the job takes other forms as well. The most numerous complaints involve the groping of female journalists while they are on assignment, often covering unruly public events such as protests or celebrations. Some journalists said they have been subjected to aggressive sexual harassment, while others reported receiving threats of sexual violence. In some cases, the reported perpetrator was a support staffer or other colleague.

One Iranian journalist, who spoke on condition of anonymity through a colleague, said she has experienced constant, unwanted advances from public officials. In one instance, a man placed his hand on her thigh during an interview. "It's clearly intended as intimidation and harassment," the woman said through the colleague. "In this part of the world, it's difficult to be a journalist. Because you're a woman, there's a kind of additional lever they can apply. You have a special vulnerability because you're both a journalist and a woman."

Grace Wattera, a writer for the newsweekly *Fraternite Matin* in Ivory Coast, said harassment is so constant that it interferes with her work. Because she is a woman, she said, "people in the government think they can use me how they want." Certain officials require her to sign in for press conferences. After her name and phone number are recorded on sign-in sheets, Wattera said, she receives sexually harassing phone calls for days at a time.

A number of journalists reported receiving threats of rape. Aissatou Sadjo Camara, a reporter for Guinean radio station Cherie FM, described a chilling episode that occurred on September 28, 2009, when a peaceful anti-government protest turned violent at a Conakry stadium. Reporting from the scene, Camara was on the phone with her station director, who was also in the stadium, when the line cut out.

Camara called back. A man picked up the phone, and identified himself as a soldier. "I'm going to change into civilian clothes and come rape you," said the man, who had beaten her boss and seized his phone. "We will come and rape you and we will destroy your family." The man continued to call for 10 consecutive days. Camara took leave from work, with the support of her station. She changed her phone number and, though she considered giving up journalism, she eventually returned to work.



Cheema was abducted and assaulted in reprisal for his work as a columnist. (SAJA)

In interview after interview, female journalists described groping as a near-constant form of abuse in many countries. “If you can find a single female journalist who hasn’t been groped in a crowd, I will be stunned,” said reporter Gretchen Peters, who has covered Pakistan and Afghanistan for more than a decade, first for The Associated Press and later for ABC News. One journalist described it as a stomachache—something you have to tolerate on certain international postings.

But when crowds turn lawless, the ache can be malignant. Heidi Levine, an American photojournalist for Paris-based Sipa Press, was in Cairo’s Tahrir Square on the night Logan was assaulted, and she describes the scene as a kind of carnival-esque mayhem, the likes of which she had never seen before. “It was terrible to make it through the square that night,” she said. “The violence unleashed gives permission for people to behave how they want to behave.”



Sinclair is among many who say crowd scenes pose risks. (Andrea Bruce)

Others described similarly malevolent crowd scenes. “The most I was ever groped was at Arafat’s funeral,” freelance photojournalist Stephanie Sinclair said. “I got groped a thousand times. It was horrifying. Everyone said it was hardest thing they ever covered. It was awful to be groped like that, on every part of my body.”

Kate Brooks, a photographer based in Turkey who freelances for *The New Yorker*, *The Wall Street Journal* and others, said a man grabbed her crotch from behind as she was photographing the scene of a suicide bombing in Afghanistan. Brooks said she usually tolerates groping—“it’s the way things are in the field”—but she found that episode as inexplicable as it was disturbing. Can it possibly be sexual, she asked, in such circumstances?

For female international journalists, risk can come not only from strangers on the street but from the men who guard their lodging, drive their cars, or help arrange appointments. One journalist who spoke on condition of anonymity told CPJ that her fixer had harassed and sexually assaulted her. Another said she often slept with a knife under her pillow while in a foreign bureau’s house out of fear a guard might “take his chances.”

For local journalists, threats can also come from within. An Afghan reporter told CPJ that a co-worker sexually assaulted and held her at gunpoint for hours, but cultural stigmas prevented her from reporting the attack. “Women don’t report sexual attacks most of the time because family honor is very important,” said the journalist, who spoke on condition of anonymity due to fear of reprisal. “If something like that gets reported, the girl herself will be blamed by the family and everyone around her.”

## A culture of silence

There is a female reporter in West Africa who wants CPJ to tell her story. Before now, she has told only one

person, her doctor, what happened. She recounted being beaten and gang-raped by members of an armed rebel group while on assignment. She then witnessed a superior officer shoot one of her attackers after he had come upon the scene. But she chose not to tell her editor for fear it would harm her own reputation. She could not report the attack to police, she believed, because they would not take it seriously, perhaps even mock her or solicit a bribe. She felt empty, terrified, and traumatized. Years later, she still does. She spoke only on condition that her name and other identifying details, including her country, be withheld.

The documentation of sexual assaults against journalists has been scarce. Rodney Pinder, head of the International News Safety Institute, a nonprofit that provides advice and assistance to journalists working in dangerous environments, said his organization encountered considerable reluctance among female journalists when it conducted a 2005 survey of security issues facing women in the profession. "They didn't want to encourage a situation in which male editors assigning stories might be reluctant to send a woman out in field," Pinder said. "They felt that it might affect them negatively if their employers or their assignment editors felt that they had to be given special care, attention, protection."

Sexual assault is "the silencing crime," said Elana Newman, head of research for the Dart Center. "I think it's an underreported experience probably for both men and women journalists," Newman said. "I think there's still a stigma associated with sexual assault. The [journalism] field is incredibly competitive. There are so many difficulties; people are not apt to want to report any additional stressors in the field because of the competitiveness and the stigma related to any kind of assault on the body."

*ProPublica's* Kim Barker described the women attracted to international journalism as "aggressive, assertive, strong" with a "constant desire to prove ourselves, to show that we can play in that environment." Like most of the female foreign correspondents CPJ interviewed, she talked about experiencing recurring, low-level sexual abuse in the field. But Barker told CPJ that international journalists generally don't want to "cry sexual assault. ... I think it's difficult for us to talk about this stuff because we don't want to look like we're weak, or whiners. The tendency of bosses is to want someone who knows what to do and doesn't need hand-holding. The fear would be that they would just simply pull you from the assignment."

Barbara Crossette, former U.N. bureau chief for *The New York Times*, said media outlets may not want to hear about sexual assaults overseas for another reason: "If you talk about it a lot, it reflects badly on the [host] country and the people, and sometimes editors or producers at media organizations don't want to have trouble with the government."

One U.S. journalist recounted an Iraqi government minder trying to force himself on her in a hotel room and then sexually harassing her afterward. What was worse, she said, was her media outlet's response. A female manager treated her "with hostility for jeopardizing a story instead of giving caring advice and support. ... I was crushed by the response of the people I worked with and trusted," said the journalist, who recounted the story on condition of anonymity. The news outlet eventually pulled her off the assignment.

Many local journalists face intense cultural barriers to reporting sexual abuse. Mehmeh Sarfraz, joint general secretary of South Asian Women in Media, said female journalists fear they will shame their families and besmirch their own reputations by reporting an assault to authorities or their employers. And, she said, "they know nothing will come out of it."

Deborah Nyangulu-Chipofya, secretary-general of the Media Institute of Southern Africa in Malawi, said that in her country, threats of any nature are usually reported to editors. Police, on the other hand, are a different story. They “usually say they will investigate the matter, but I can't recall any case that has ever reached prosecution,” she said. The perception of official indifference to assault sows self-censorship among journalists, Nyangulu-Chipofya said. “Sometimes reporters have failed to ask the president questions for fear of what his party supporters might do.”

## A threat to press freedom

“Sexual assault and rape are not about sex,” said Columbia University journalism professor Helen Benedict, who has written extensively on rape and the military. “It's about humiliation and degradation and power.”

And so it is with the press. Sexual attacks against journalists have the effect of silencing the messenger and blocking the dissemination of news and information. In the same manner as other types of attacks, sexual aggression is a direct assault on the internationally guaranteed rights to freedom of expression and access to information. “Sexual assault ranks in my mind with beatings, with torture, with imprisonments, with killings,” said Pinder of the news safety institute.

But if silence has been the practice until now, the assault against Logan may have accelerated changes in attitudes across the profession. In March, *New York Times* photojournalist Lynsey Addario disclosed the sexual abuse she endured while abducted with colleagues in Libya. Her goal was to cast shame where it was deserved: “I've worked long enough in the Muslim world to know that it is grossly, grossly embarrassing to hear that men in your country have been touching women who are not their wives. I knew it would shame them, and that's why I've come forward.” (*Times* colleague Stephen Farrell told CPJ that he, too, was sexually abused in one instance while being held captive with Addario in Libya.)



Levine, far left, faces harassment in Hebron. (AP)

As CPJ was first gathering contacts for this report, photojournalist Levine called several colleagues. Levine was surprised, she said, that they all wanted to talk about what they'd been through. What happened to Logan, a CPJ board member, changed their thinking. “It was very brave of her to talk about it publicly,” Levine said. “She gave us all a lot of courage to speak openly and frankly because before we didn't. Definitely things have changed from the past.”

Changes are needed in newsrooms as well. David Verdi, NBC's vice president for newsgathering, said the network has had “ongoing, animated, and

vibrant” discussions about putting its people in harm's way. “Is a woman more vulnerable because rape is a weapon of war?” he asked. “It always comes down to the same answer: It's a voluntary assignment and we're going to openly discuss all of the risks. We're about mitigating risks, and we're about complete and total transparency. In the end, we let our employees make the final decision about putting themselves into harm's



way.” He said two network journalists have been sexually assaulted in the field, although he declined to provide details. Verdi said both journalists were offered medical and psychological counseling, although they chose not to go to the police.

NBC is implementing a new training course for journalists entering hostile environments, Verdi said, and it will address the risks of sexual assault. The course will “train people to take preventative steps to lessen your chance of being sexually assaulted,” Verdi said. “It’s going to deal with every culture from the American workplace to a checkpoint in the Libyan desert.” Other news organizations said they, too, have incorporated the threat of sexual assault into their security training.

Advocacy organizations such as CPJ have an obligation as well. While murders, imprisonments, instances of censorship, and other forms of assaults are regularly documented by CPJ and other press groups worldwide, sexual violence has remained a dark, largely unexplored corner. By documenting sexual abuse, CPJ and other press groups not only enable journalists to understand the risk, they can define the issue as a threat to free expression, seek justice in individual cases, and pursue systemic reforms.

The Colombian journalist Bedoya stayed quiet for many years. But when Oxfam International, a nonprofit that seeks to combat poverty and injustice, contacted her about its study of sexual violence in Colombia, Bedoya realized she could give voice to others by speaking publicly about her own experience. Doing so has also rekindled her desire for justice.

Colombian authorities never prosecuted Bedoya’s attackers. Now, 11 years after the assault, Bedoya is seeking to bring a case to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights on grounds that the Colombian government failed in its duty to seek justice. The time for silence is over.

*Lauren Wolfe is senior editor for the Committee to Protect Journalists. She has written previously about the issue of sexual violence against journalists on the **CPJ Blog**. CPJ gratefully acknowledges the support of the **International Women's Media Foundation** in the preparation of this report.*



# CPJ Security Guide:

## Addendum on Sexual Aggression

In conjunction with the release of its special report, "The Silencing Crime: Sexual Assault and Journalists," CPJ is issuing an addendum to its existing journalist security guide. The addendum, written by CPJ Journalist Security Coordinator Frank Smyth, addresses the issue of sexual aggression against journalists and focuses on ways to minimize the risk. The addendum, published below, is also available in the full text of CPJ's online security guide.

### Sexual Aggression

The sexual assault of CBS correspondent and CPJ board member Lara Logan while covering political unrest in Cairo in February 2011 has highlighted this important security issue for journalists. Dozens of other journalists have reported to CPJ that they, too, had been victimized on past assignments. Both local and international journalists reported being attacked. Most reported victims were women, although men were also targeted, often while in detention or captivity. Journalists have reported assaults that range from groping to rape by multiple attackers.

Being aware of one's environment and understanding how one may be perceived in that setting are important in deterring many forms of sexual aggression. The **International News Safety Institute**, a consortium of news organizations and journalist groups that includes CPJ, and **Judith Matloff**, a veteran foreign correspondent and journalism professor, have each published checklists aimed at minimizing the risk of sexual aggression in the field. A number of their suggestions are incorporated here, along with the advice of numerous journalists and security experts consulted by CPJ.

If you are traveling to a location, especially for the first time, always seek prior advice from colleagues with experience in that locale. Journalists and experts emphasize that situation-specific advice from trusted colleagues is crucial in planning an assignment and assessing risks in the field.

Journalists should dress conservatively and in accord with local custom; wearing head scarves in some regions, for example, may be advisable for female journalists. Female journalists should consider wearing a wedding band, or a ring that looks like one, regardless of whether they are married. They should avoid wearing necklaces, ponytails, or anything that can be grabbed. Numerous experts advise female journalists to avoid tight-fitting T-shirts and jeans, makeup, and jewelry in order to avoid unwanted attention. Consider wearing heavy belts and boots that are hard to remove, along with loose-fitting clothing. Carrying equipment discreetly, in non-descript

bags, can also avoid unwanted attention. Journalists should consider carrying pepper spray or even spray deodorant in case they need to deter aggressors.

Journalists should travel and work with colleagues or support staff for a wide range of security reasons. Fixers, translators, and drivers can provide an important measure of protection for international journalists, particularly while traveling or on assignments involving crowds or chaotic conditions, according to experts. Support staff can monitor the overall security of a situation and identify potential risks while the journalist is working. It is very important that journalists use care and diligence in vetting support staff and that they seek recommendations from colleagues. Some journalists have reported instances of sexual aggression by support staff.

Experts suggest that journalists appear familiar and confident in their setting but avoid striking up conversation or making eye contact with strangers. Female journalists should be aware that gestures of familiarity, such as hugging or smiling, even with colleagues, can be misinterpreted and raise the risk of unwanted attention. Don't mingle in a predominantly male crowd, experts say; stay close to the edges and have an escape path in mind. When traveling, try to choose a hotel with security guards whenever possible, and avoid rooms with accessible windows or balconies. Use all locks on hotel doors, and consider using your own lock and doorknob alarm as well. The International News Safety Institute suggests journalists have a cover story prepared ("I'm waiting for my colleague to arrive," for example) if they are getting unwanted attention.

In general, try to avoid situations that raise risk, experts say. Those include staying in remote areas without a trusted companion; getting in unofficial taxis or taxis with multiple strangers; using elevators or corridors where one would be alone with strangers; eating out alone unless one is sure of the setting; or spending long periods alone with male sources or support staff. Carry a mobile phone with security numbers, including your professional contacts and local emergency contacts. Keeping in regular contact with one's newsroom editors and compiling and disseminating contact information for one's self and support staff is always good practice for a broad range of security reasons. Editors should be assertive in raising security questions about an overall deployment and each planned assignment.

If a journalist perceives imminent sexual assault, she or he should do or say something to change the dynamic, experts recommend. Screaming or yelling for help if people are within earshot is one option. Shouting out something unexpected such as, "Is that a police car?" could be another. Dropping, breaking, or throwing something that might cause a startle could be a third. Urinating or soiling oneself could be a further step.

The **Humanitarian Practice Network**, a forum for workers and policy-makers engaged in humanitarian work, has produced a safety guide that includes some advice pertinent to journalists. The HPN, part of the UK-based Overseas Development Institute, suggests that international visitors have some knowledge of the local language, and that they use vernacular phrases if threatened with assault as a way to alter the situation.

Protecting and preserving one's life in the face of sexual assault is the overarching guideline, HPN and other experts say. Some security experts recommend journalists learn self-defense skills to fight off attackers. There is a countervailing belief among some experts that fighting off an assailant could increase the risk of fatal violence. Factors to consider are the number of assailants, whether weapons are involved, and whether the setting is public or private. Some experts suggest fighting back if an assailant seeks to take an individual from the scene of an initial attack to another location.

Sexual assault affects both female and male journalists. Although female journalists constitute the large majority of those assaulted while on assignment, CPJ research shows, sexual abuse can also occur when a journalist is being detained by a government or being held captive by irregular forces. In such instances, both men and women have been targets of abuse. Developing relationships with one's guards or captors and seeking to stay together with any fellow captured journalist may reduce the risk of all forms of assault. But journalists should be aware that abuse can occur in such circumstances and they may have few options. Protecting one's life is the primary goal.

News organizations can include guidelines on the risk of sexual assault in their security manuals as a way to increase attention and encourage discussion. While documentation specific to sexual assaults against journalists is limited, organizations can identify places where the overall risk is greater, such as conflict zones where rape is used as a weapon, areas where the rule of law is weak, and settings where sexual aggression is common. Organizations can set clear policies on how to respond to sexual assaults that address the journalist's needs for medical, legal, and psychological support. Such reports should be treated as a medical urgency and as an overall security threat that affects other journalists. Managers addressing sexual assault cases must be sensitive to the journalist's wishes in terms of confidentiality, and mindful of the emotional impact of such an experience. The journalist's immediate needs include empathy, respect, and security.

Journalists who have been assaulted may consider reporting the attack as a means of obtaining proper medical support and to document the security risk for others. Some journalists told CPJ they were reluctant to report sexual abuse because they did not want to be perceived as being vulnerable while on dangerous assignments. Editorial managers should create a climate in which journalists can report assaults without fear of losing future assignments and with confidence they will receive support and assistance.

The Committee to Protect Journalists is committed to documenting instances of sexual assault. Journalists are encouraged to contact CPJ to report such cases; information about a case is made public or kept confidential at the discretion of the journalist.

Committee to Protect Journalists  
330 7th Avenue, 11th Floor  
New York, NY 10001

Web: [www.cpj.org](http://www.cpj.org)  
Twitter: [@pressfreedom](https://twitter.com/pressfreedom)  
Facebook: [@committeetoprotectjournalists](https://www.facebook.com/committeetoprotectjournalists)

Email: [info@cpj.org](mailto:info@cpj.org)  
Tel: 212-465-1004