



**JOURNALISM FOR THE PUBLIC GOOD:
THE MICHENER AWARDS AT FIFTY**

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Disruption on All Fronts

The disruptive explosion of the Internet in the 2010s gave rise to social media and a host of new challenges including mis- and disinformation. The long-established media ecology with its checks and balances fractured. Media organizations lost their gatekeeping role as purveyors of news and information. Journalists found their work undermined on all sides. Technology-driven social media platforms became a marketplace for unfiltered news, opinion, commentary and lies. Echo chambers, communities of interest or like-minded people, gathered in chat rooms, some to learn to crochet and others to foment dissent. The guy next door with a computer and a point of view could become an influencer with audiences bigger than his local newspaper. Political leaders like Donald Trump saw opportunities to advance their careers by discrediting the message of mainstream journalists and normalizing the fake news loop.¹ With that came abusive behaviour toward journalists, making the workplace unsafe in the field and online.

This polarization of civil discourse became endemic, aggravated by online manipulation of information from bots and trolls. It led to allegations of attempted electoral interference by China, Russia and Iran in Canada's 2019 and 2021 federal elections and Russia's involvement in the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign.² It gave rise to fake news conspiracies such as Pizzagate hatched in chat rooms on the Deep Web.³ Democratic practices and principles were under threat. So was independent fact-based journalism. "Without facts, you can't have truth. Without truth, you can't have trust. Without all three, we have no shared reality, and democracy as we know it — and all meaningful human endeavours — are dead," wrote Nobel Peace Prize-winner Maria Ressa of *Rappler* in the Philippines⁴

As an organization dedicated to journalism in the public interest, the Michener Awards Foundation had a role to play in supporting facts, truth and trust — if it was ready to step up. The organization has a role in supporting journalists and news organizations, but first, the Michener directors had to

deal with two internal challenges: conflict around the board's governance structure and decision-making process, and the possible loss of the patronage of the governor general. These two issues had to be resolved to renew and strengthen the purpose and direction of the Foundation. Then, the board could align the fellowships to address current problems of press freedom and misinformation and deepen its commitment to public service journalism. But first, the Michener Awards Foundation had to clean up its own house.

Cleaning house

Post-2015, institutions everywhere were being forced into change. Media companies were upended by the Internet and social media. The same was true at the Michener Awards Foundation. For years a tight executive ran the organization. "Board members do not participate in the governance of the Michener Foundation, nor are they responsible to raise funds or to donate funds themselves," noted the executive minutes from April 7, 2017.⁵ Since 2005, the executive — most from the Ottawa area — had run the Foundation. "It was very clubby. The Ottawa residents, they all got together and that small group, it was very much their organization," said Alan Allnutt, a relative newcomer who had joined the board in 2014.⁶ Allnutt was a Victoria-based writer and consultant who had an esteemed career as publisher and editor of the *Montreal Gazette*, publisher of the *Victoria Times-Colonist*, regional publisher for Postmedia's Alberta and Saskatchewan newspapers, and senior vice-president with Postmedia. It was clear to Allnutt and other directors that the executive was cautious when it came to change. Much of that caution focused on protecting the patronage of the governor general and Rideau Hall.

The executive had taken a safe, steady-as-she-goes approach and coasted through the 2000s. The annual cycle ran like clockwork year-on-year — the call for entries for the awards and fellowships, judging and preparation for the annual spring awards ceremony at Rideau Hall. The 1970 model was tweaked in the 1980s by Paul Deacon, the Foundation's first president. The volunteer judging panels operated independently, while the executive focused on fundraising to pay for the fellowships and, throughout the 2000s, cultivating warm relations with governors general Adrienne Clarkson, Michaëlle Jean and David Johnston, and with the Rideau Hall staff. The better the relationship with Rideau Hall, the bigger the celebration.

Each spring, the directors — a mix of publishers and retired media executives — flew to Ottawa for the annual general meeting, where the executive

presented the business to be discussed and approved. Limited engagement was required from the board members. Without fail, the meeting adjourned before one o'clock to give members time to get ready for the annual trip to Rideau Hall and the celebration of journalism in the public interest.

After a seven-year term, Russ Mills stepped aside as Michener Foundation president at the June 2017 annual meeting, and I was elected president. On the surface, the appointment was a signal of change to the journalism community: I was a journalism professor, international trainer, university administrator, former CBC radio reporter and editor from Nova Scotia and the second female to take the job in the institution's forty-seven-year history. My unstated mission was to reengage the directors and tackle pressing issues. So before the annual meeting ended, members agreed to serve on three new sub-committees — social media, governance and fellowship review — with a request to report back in the fall. The industry was changing so quickly, and the Foundation needed to up its game.

At that meeting, the board elected Chris Waddell — the most senior member of the awards judging panel — to fill the now-vacant chief judge position.⁷ He had served nine years on the awards panel and was well qualified to take on the top job. Waddell was a respected journalism professor and former director of the School of Journalism at Carleton University, an author and seasoned award-winning journalist with CBC Television News and the *Globe and Mail*. Waddell had one condition. He would take the job of chief judge if the Michener Foundation contracted the Canadian Journalism Foundation (CJF) to handle the online application process and compile the entries for the judges.

As a judge for the CJF, Waddell observed that “a lot of the same entries go to the CJF excellence award as go to the Michener Award and at the same time news organizations were getting smaller and smaller. There were fewer people managing in the newsroom. So they can't pull someone aside to spend a month working on all these [award submissions] because it takes a while to get these entries together.”⁸ If the Micheners wanted to encourage new organizations to share their work, Waddell felt the Foundation needed to make the process easier. After all, this was a digital, multimedia world.

Processing Michener entries had become far more complex and time-consuming than in the 1970s when Bill MacPherson and Fraser MacDougall managed this work on their own time in a spare bedroom. The media silos of print, TV, radio and magazine were crumbling and merging. Gone were

the days of media outlets sending a VCR, audio cassette, CD or tear sheets from the newspaper. Now the chief judge was sorting electronic entries that contained text, audio, video and graphics and responding to as many as sixty media managers. Waddell was in the midst of setting up a new degree program at Carleton and did not have time to spend days on tedious administrative work as previous chief judges had done. While some on the board questioned the need to contract out services, director John Honderich, the chair of Torstar, supported the move to “reduce the burden on the chief judge for collecting and collating the entries.”⁹

Waddell’s nomination as chief judge received approval from the board at the annual general meeting. So did his pitch for some backroom help, as the minutes noted. “Prof. Waddell would lead a plan to negotiate an arrangement with the Canadian Journalism Foundation to accept and collate all entries using a program developed by the CJF while protecting the integrity of the involvement of Rideau Hall in all aspects of the judging process for the Michener Award and the Michener-Deacon fellowships.”¹⁰ As Waddell later explained, “It was a condition designed to both make it easier for judges, to bring the whole process into more modern times and to try to make it easier for news organizations who might be entering.”¹¹ Little did anyone realize the internal brouhaha that would erupt.

The discussion over contracting out would bring to the forefront internal governance dysfunction within the Michener Foundation and initiate huge changes within the organization. What became evident in the fall of 2017 was a lingering wariness among long-serving directors about the intentions of the CJF.¹² The unease had its roots in the mid-1980s and the CJF’s then business-friendly slant. The Michener board had watched CJF grow and become an important advocate for journalism — a long way from its rocky beginnings. Waddell’s proposal to bring in the CJF revealed simmering frustration among board members with the top-down and closed decision-making process of the Michener executive. That crisis would lead to internal governance improvements, but not without some blood on the floor.

Waddell spent the summer working on a detailed proposal with Natalie Turvey, the President and CEO of the CJF. It outlined tiers with a price tag for various services. The package was presented to the September meeting of the executive. It met with a wall of resistance. “As presented, they feel the agreement would compromise the independence of the award,” the minutes noted.¹³ For some, the proposal went far beyond what was contemplated or

presented at the AGM. Past presidents Russ Mills and David Humphreys, who were members of the executive, identified a long list of problems, including the application process, promotion, reporting, tickets to the ceremony and the price tag. The top tier estimate for service had come in three times higher than the \$2,000 estimated cost at the AGM.

In any case, Mills asserted Rideau Hall would not approve the plan. “We administer the award for Rideau Hall. It is not our award. We are not free to contract out administration of the award,” he explained.¹⁴ For Mills, Rideau Hall had the same sense of ownership of the Michener that it had for the Order of Canada and other decorations.¹⁵ It cut to the core of how long-serving members saw the place of the Michener Award in Rideau Hall. This belief had been passed down and guided decisions and actions of the executive since the formation of the Michener Awards Foundation in 1983. The long-held belief of the Michener executive was not the reality.

For Rideau Hall, the Michener Award differed from the Governor General’s Awards for the arts, sciences and humanities, and the Chancellery of Honour awards.¹⁶ The Michener Award belonged in the group of awards created by previous governors general and was considered independent of Rideau Hall.¹⁷ The Michener Award and fellowships were the responsibility of the Michener Foundation, a self-governing, registered charitable organization — not Rideau Hall. As board member James Baxter, then publisher of *iPolitics*, explained, “We are partners of Rideau Hall, not some subordinate appendage. That is also how the staff at Rideau Hall see us. This award would have been relegated to the scrap heap of history were it not for the funds built by this Foundation.”¹⁸

However, an important aspect of the awards was viceregal patronage and the recognition by the State of independent journalism as being essential to the functioning of a healthy democracy. The message from the executive was clear. It was prepared to do what was necessary to protect that relationship with Rideau Hall. The executive meeting ended with an understanding that Edith Cody-Rice, the secretary to the board and former CBC media lawyer, would amend the draft agreement.

The internal crisis among the executive deepened after Chris Waddell and I met with Stephen Wallace, Secretary to the Governor General and others at Rideau Hall in late September 2017. Following the practices of past Michener presidents, an introduction meeting was arranged in advance of the new governor general, who was to be installed on October 2. As my notes

recorded, Secretary Stephen Wallace affirmed Rideau Hall's continued support for the Michener Awards: "More than ever this award is needed. The Michener Award Foundation has complete autonomy from Rideau Hall. Our job is to support the Foundation as a self-governing entity."¹⁹ In an email to the executive I wrote, Rideau Hall "thought this proposal by the Foundation to contract the CFJ is not a distraction to the autonomy and distinctiveness of the Michener Award, and joining forces with the joint entry, administration and promotion of our brand to a wider audience will 'only strengthen the award.' Given the volunteer nature of the Michener Award Foundation, it was a great idea to get this support."²⁰

In effect, as Waddell recalled, Rideau Hall did not care how the whole thing ran. "They just cared that nothing happened that would reflect badly on the governor general. Little did they know what was coming in their future."²¹ Within months, Wallace would retire from the public service to make way for Assunta Di Lorenzo, a Montreal lawyer with no experience in navigating the public service but was a personal friend of incoming Governor General Julie Payette. The landscape of Rideau Hall would change drastically. So would the landscape within the Michener Awards Foundation.

Reaction from other members of the executive after the Rideau Hall meeting was swift and censorious. Some members of the executive were unhappy that Waddell and I had attended a meeting, even though the executive knew about the request in advance. They were spitting mad because we raised the CJF issue. "It's important to ensure that board members feel that their role is respected and that nothing is going on behind their backs or over their heads," wrote Russ Mills.²² The pushback was surprising and ironic since I was only following observed established practices of Mills, the past president, who met annually with officials from Rideau Hall and reported after the event. For director Alan Allnutt, "The whole question was, was this partially gender-based? Like, wait a minute, you weren't supposed to be changing things on us here or proposing things that we being former presidents, former executive people wouldn't have done or didn't want to do."²³ The culture and practices of the organization had been challenged.

The governance furor sparked by the CJF proposal and the Rideau Hall meeting would only unearth and amplify tensions between the board and the executive about how decisions were made. While the executive debated, the directors remained in the dark. As a way to dial back the tension within the executive, I proposed Mills and Cody-Rice take over negotiations with

the CJF — a move that had huge consequences — and would further reveal the board’s dissatisfaction with the Foundation’s governance structure. Their first move was to suggest the idea to engage the CJF be deferred for a year.

On September 27, Waddell resigned as the chief judge and as a member of the judging panel, effective immediately. In an email, he wrote: “While I respect your attempt to find a consensus on this issue, I do not agree with the decision simply to defer it for another year.”²⁴ As Waddell later reflected, “Some of the people who’d been there for a long time perceived this [association with the CJF] as a threat to the future of the Michener Foundation and the awards and perceived it as an attempt to try to take over by stealth the awards so that they would no longer have an influence on them.”²⁵ Waddell said he was just looking for a way to make the process easier for the Michener judges and media outlets. “I resigned because I’d said that if we weren’t going to make the change, I didn’t think I wanted to do the chief judge job because I thought that we actually needed to modernize what was happening.”²⁶

The governance by the executive was so entrenched that the entire board of directors only found out a month later about the CJF negotiations and proposal, the Rideau Hall meeting and Waddell’s resignation. Over the next few days, emails started to fly fast and furious. Board members had hard and legitimate questions about the executive’s lack of transparency, and why they had been kept in the dark. Directors John Honderich and James Baxter led the charge. “As Mr. Honderich rightly noted, all of this raises some serious questions of a governance structure that puts the affairs of the Foundation in the hands of an executive committee for 364 days of the year.”²⁷

At a special board meeting on November 3, director Catherine Cano pointed out that this was the only board she sat on that meets just once a year. “We need to review the objective of the awards, to be able to make sure we know what we could and should do,” she said. “We have a good opportunity to decide what we are going to be like in five years’ or ten years’ time.” Mills conceded that “the Michener Foundation sometimes operates like an old boys’ club. That’s how it started. Perhaps we have reached a point where we need to become more orderly and write more things down.”²⁸ Mills read the room correctly. The directors demanded transparency and changed how the Foundation was governed. The Michener Awards Foundation had matured. It was no longer the upstart two-person operation of 1970 or even the same charitable foundation it became in 1983 and as such could not be run in the same manner.

By this point, I felt I could no longer work with the incumbent executive, so in a president's report written before the special meeting, I resigned. At the November special meeting, Alan Allnutt was elected interim president and Catherine Cano, vice-president. I remained a director on the board and executive. Without a chief judge I oversaw the panel for the 2017 awards and 2018 fellowship entries.

Negotiations would continue with CJF in the winter and spring of 2018. In that period, it was *status quo* for the judging procedures. A suitable service agreement was reached with the CJF to compile Michener Awards entries electronically. It was up and running in time for the new chief judge Margo Goodhand and the panel in early 2019. The agreement lasted two years until the Foundation updated its website and developed its own electronic system in partnership with the Rideau Hall Foundation.

Reflecting on that time, Allnutt said that, at first, he thought it was a perfectly good idea to align with the CJF. But then, in subsequent discussions with the CJF, "There was this whole sense of *ugh*, they just want to swallow us. . . . And that's the paranoia that I got struck with, that somehow the Canadian Journalism Foundation awards would end up being the big ones and that the Michener Awards would be a secondary thing that they also gave out."²⁹ This realization propelled Allnutt into the presidency, and other directors to become more actively engaged in the work of the Foundation. As Allnutt said, the internal crisis gave the board an opportunity to take stock and, once again, ask the questions, "What are we, why are we?"³⁰

The existential event awakened new possibilities in Allnutt and the other directors on the Michener board. As Waddell now sees it, "It actually forced people to confront issues that should have been confronted previously. I thought for a while we might be able to make change without disruption and that wasn't possible, but that's the history of a lot of organizations."³¹

The immediate impact was the governance committee set up in June 2017 went into high gear. Allnutt led the process of transforming the Foundation from the "club" model — that it had long outgrown — to a governance model that met modern standards and best practices. In June 2018, the board approved a bylaw concerning the affairs of the Foundation that included set terms for directors.³² Gone were the forever appointments, and the board was to meet at least twice a year. At that same meeting, a new policy expanded on the by-law and spelled out the responsibilities of each member of the executive and board.³³ These changes led to new board members and a renewed

engagement of directors in the foundation's day-to-day business. With this challenge in hand, the Michener Awards Foundation turned its attention to Rideau Hall and the Office of the Governor General.

Patronage

In 2017, after David Johnston's successful six-year term, the Trudeau government appointed Julie Payette as the twenty-ninth governor general. Payette was francophone, female, an engineer and scientist, and a single mom with a teenage son. She had worked as an astronaut and had flown two missions in space. She had won great acclaim for her work at NASA's Mission Control Centre in Houston and with the Canada Space Agency.³⁴

Soon after Payette's appointment, surprising revelations of her personal life appearing in the media gave the Michener Awards Foundation cause for concern. Board members wondered with Payette under the media's microscope, what this might mean for an award that honours investigative journalism. After forty-seven years, the Michener Awards faced the unthinkable possibility: the loss of the patronage of the Office of the Governor General and the ceremony at Rideau Hall.

The support of the governor general and Rideau Hall elevated the Micheners above other industry awards.³⁵ The Foundation had been fortunate. Five of the nine previous governors general had been journalists and understood the connection between journalism in the public interest and viceregal recognition. And with each appointment, the Foundation had made a great effort to ensure that the incoming governor general understood the value of her or his patronage for public interest journalism and the Micheners.

Since the beginning of the awards, the Michener directors had operated under the assumption of viceregal support. The question was not *if*, but *how much* support the awards would get. That long-held assumption was called into question in 2017 with Payette's appointment.

It was all smiles and promises on that July day on Parliament Hill when Prime Minister Justin Trudeau made the announcement, a beaming Payette at his side. Congratulatory media coverage followed. Stories praised Payette's "impressive resumé" and listed all her accomplishments.³⁶ In a glowing editorial, the *Toronto Star* wrote that "Payette has all the attributes to make an excellent governor general. . . . Payette embodies a rare blend of qualities — determination, ambition and singular achievement."³⁷

Four days later, the tone of the news and commentary sharpened after Ottawa-based *iPolitics* broke the story that, in 2011 when living in Maryland, Payette had been charged with second-degree assault during a domestic dispute. The assault charges had been dropped within weeks and expunged from the court records. The online publication also reported that Payette had her divorce records sealed just weeks before the July announcement of her appointment as governor general. In a statement to *iPolitics*, Payette wrote: “For family and personal reasons, I will not comment on these unfounded charges, of which I was immediately and completely cleared many years ago, and I hope that people will respect my private life.”³⁸

The publisher of *iPolitics*, James Baxter, was also a long-serving director with the Michener Awards Foundation. As he explained to columnist Susan Delacourt, “We think this is a story because it was such a random [background] check and we turned up an arrest,” Baxter said. “From there, as we began to look, we saw the elements of a concerted effort to sanitize the record. There’s nothing wrong with that, of course. But the GG is not just any position. People call it ceremonial, but it carries a lot of weight.”³⁹

The *iPolitics* stories served to intensify media focus on Payette’s past. A group of media outlets, including *iPolitics*, went to court to get access to sealed divorce court records. “The *Star* is seeking access to the court documents to determine if there is something in them of public interest in regards to Canada’s next governor general,” said the editor of the *Toronto Star*, Michael Cooke.⁴⁰ He made it clear that the media had no interest in publishing the private details of the child in the case. The records showed not only details of Payette’s divorce but also information about a car accident a couple of months before the 2011 assault. Payette had accidentally hit and killed a pedestrian while driving home from a trip.⁴¹

As the stories rolled out, letters to the editor and members of the scientific community criticized the media for persecuting the new governor general. But from the perspective of journalists, they were doing their job by giving citizens information about an important public figure, the head of state in Canada. The directors of the Michener Foundation sat back and waited to see how this media coverage would affect Payette’s regard for the Michener Award celebrations at Rideau Hall.

After that opening salvo, Payette said journalists and columnists found fault with her at every opportunity. “It was relentless,” she recalled in a 2023 interview. “At one point in time, I wrote down what was the trend. The first

year: I wasn't really representing all Canadians, I had said the wrong word at one speech, which I learned my lesson from. After that I didn't like my job and I was not fit for the job. Then I didn't work hard . . . then I was influencing the honour system, and so on, which was completely the opposite. And then I was a bad person."⁴² In contrast, she pointed to some of her initiatives that received scant news coverage: GG Interactive and Conversations with classrooms across the country, her visits to smaller communities, her community involvement as a chorister, her Ottawa choir's Juno and her work with Rideau Hall staff to make the honours and awards system more inclusive and diverse.

Previous governors general — like all public officials — faced media scrutiny. For example, Jeanne Sauvé's health, Adrienne Clarkson's travel and spending and Michaëlle Jean's French citizenship and the alleged separatist sympathies of her husband. Media scrutiny was just part of holding such a high public position. Payette's predecessor David Johnston, reflecting on his tenure, understood that clearly. "When I was governor general some of the finalists had done stories that were critical of the Office of the Governor General. So be it. That's democracy."⁴³ Former governors general kept a stiff upper lip and did their duty when it came to opening Rideau Hall for the Michener Awards ceremony. In 2018, however, the Michener Foundation was worried the awards could be caught in the fallout from the public dissection and ongoing media scrutiny of Payette's past. Indications were leaning that way.

In January 2018, Michener president Alan Allnutt and vice-president Catherine Cano began a long and complicated dance with the Office of the Governor General to get a date for the awards ceremony. It did not look promising, especially after a conversation Cano had with Rideau Hall. "The Governor General is reviewing all award ceremonies to decide which ones she will keep. We are on a long list and not at the top of the list," Cano reported to the board in February 2018.⁴⁴

From the perspective of Payette, awards come and go. "It's not like the whole thing was set in concrete," she explained. "In the case of the Micheners, it was very clear where it came from and the importance of it. But there were other ones that needed concentration."⁴⁵ She pointed to the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC) Herzberg Medal in Science and Engineering. It came with a \$1M prize and, for the longest time, had been presented in a hotel in Ottawa. Choices were being made.

Everything was in flux, including the landscape at Rideau Hall. Since the Michener meeting in September 2017, when the then secretary had assured the Michener Foundation of the support of Her Excellency for the awards, staff had changed. Many long-serving administrators and senior staff had been replaced or left.

With Rideau Hall weighing competing demands for recognition, months passed with no commitment to host an awards ceremony. In an interview, Payette recalled that the Michener was not a high priority for Rideau Hall for several reasons. One consideration, Payette said, was that even though former governor general Roland Michener founded the Michener Award, it was not part of Rideau Hall's embedded awards and honours. The Michener Foundation was independent, with its own rules, regulations and administration and out of the control of Rideau Hall. With all the negative media coverage, reputational problems for the Office of the Governor General had to be considered. Payette gave the example of the Innovation Awards that are administered externally but had been given at Rideau Hall. "We gave the award. And one of these persons that got an award while I was still in the position was expelled from the country for spying from a microbiology lab in Winnipeg. Whose picture do you think was in the newspaper with that person? The Governor General giving the award."⁴⁶ Payette already had enough bad press. She was not keen for more.

By May, the situation had become critical for the Michener Foundation. The judging was complete, the finalists for the Michener Award were announced and still no movement at Rideau Hall. Worry was turning into a crisis. The Foundation turned to John Fraser for help. If anyone could persuade Payette of the value of pushing through with the Michener ceremony, it was Fraser, a former Master of Massey College at the University of Toronto and head of the Institute for the Study of the Crown. He was a mentor and advisor to Payette going back to her student days at the University of Toronto.

"I called her and she said, well, why should I do it? . . . I had to listen to all the stuff that she was so angry still about the reporting on her, and I said, well, that just goes with the territory, I'm afraid." Fraser tried to impress upon her that "the whole mystique of those Michener Awards is that they're recognized by the nominal head of state as an important thing in journalism, more than just the article. . . . You just couldn't say anything good about journalists at that point, and I just said, you don't want to make them angrier at you than they already are."⁴⁷ As Payette recalled, Fraser was just one of many people

she consulted about the situation. “And if I know someone who has direct knowledge of a particular thing, yeah, then of course, I will pay even more attention.”⁴⁸

While Payette weighed the options, the lobbying and contingency planning for the awards ceremony absorbed much of the Michener board’s energies for the first five months of 2018. No one wanted to face the question: what would the Michener Award represent without the governor general and Rideau Hall? The Foundation did not have to face that crisis because despite “the extremely negative coverage, unrelentless coverage,” in the end Payette “would welcome them. And I would show them I thought that their work is important right now and they should have judgement on what they focus.”⁴⁹ On May 9, two days after a crucial board planning meeting, Rideau Hall set the date for the forty-eighth Michener Award ceremony for June 12, 2018.

Her Excellency Julie Payette put her stamp on the ceremony. The room was rearranged so that the chairs faced the side of the room and there was no raised platform. “Even with a pedestal I felt uncomfortable because I never felt I was above anybody. On the contrary, I was beside, if not behind,”⁵⁰ Payette explained. As Rideau Hall had requested, the ceremony was tighter, shorter and bilingual.⁵¹ Her Excellency surprised everyone by entering and taking a seat in a row among the guests. It was a signal that she would do things her own way.

Payette’s speech addressed the current media ecology and the echo chamber of information and disinformation. “As journalists, you are among the guardians and defenders of our liberty and our democracy. I believe deeply in the importance of having experienced, independent media organizations and journalists that are capable of casting a critical eye on the daily flow of events and information. Their existence, along with the standards to which they adhere, form part of the checks and balances that define a healthy society.”⁵² If Payette had any hidden message for the media that evening, it might have been when she said, “Striking the right balance between fostering maximum access to information and deciding which relevant facts to divulge, given the possible consequences, is no easy task. Rigour and excellence in ensuring that balance are precisely what the Michener Awards were created to celebrate.”

That night the 2017 Michener Award went to the *Globe and Mail*. Its twenty-month investigation “Unfounded” collected data from more than 870 police forces to tell the story of serious flaws in how police across the country handle allegations of sexual assault, and the devastating results.

Reporter Robyn Doolittle took readers to a student party in London, Ontario, in October 2010. A young woman, “Ava”, tells her story of being drugged and waking to find a man on top of her who would not listen to her pleas to stop:

Terror shot through Ava’s body. In that moment, she realized the man hadn’t simply misunderstood her. He wasn’t playing around. He was raping her. No one could hear her call for help. She had no idea what to do. She wondered if he would kill her when it was over. She stopped fighting and went still.

Suddenly, there was a flash. Ava looked over and saw four or five men pointing cellphone cameras in her direction. She became frantic. The man on top of her ran away. He left his wallet behind, police later told Ava. She was left naked and curled on the ground, her back and hair covered in dirt . . .

In fact, the London Police Service detective concluded that what happened to Ava that night was not a crime.

There are many ways to shut a case without laying a charge. Not enough evidence? There’s a closure code for that. Complainant doesn’t want to proceed with charges? There’s a code for that, too.

On Nov. 13, 2010, the detective closed Ava’s file as “unfounded,” another formal police classification that rendered her allegations baseless.

It meant a crime was neither attempted, nor occurred. It did not immediately brand Ava a liar, necessarily. But it meant she was not raped.

According to police records, the suspect was given a warning.

Ava’s case is not an outlier. Her complaint is among the more than 5,000 allegations of sexual assault closed as unfounded by Canadian law enforcement every year, according to a *Globe and Mail* investigation into the authorities’ handling of sexual-assault cases. Rape, the most serious of those, is a crime so

injurious to victims that the judiciary considers it second only to murder in severity.⁵³

The series revealed that ‘unfounded’ rates varied from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. It raised questions about equity of access to justice.⁵⁴ “What has emerged is a picture of a system that is clearly broken,” wrote Doolittle.⁵⁵

Within six weeks of publication, the federal government promised better police oversight, training and policies. The prime minister also committed \$100 million to specialized training to assist police in dealing with gender-based violence. Statistics Canada promised to resume collecting and publishing ‘unfounded’ rates. The biggest surprise was when the *Globe and Mail* received a letter from the RCMP to thank them for “instructing them on where they had fallen short.”⁵⁶ That night at the awards ceremony in June 2018, Doolittle emphasized, “The real way to fix the system is for more people to come forward, and that’s only going to happen if there’s trust in the system.” Following the series, police services across the country reviewed some 37,000 sexual assault cases and re-opened more than 400 ‘unfounded’ cases.

If there were any doubts about the ongoing impact of this Michener Award-winning series, Doolittle did a follow-up in December 2022. The data showed that the rate of sexual assault complaints rejected as unfounded had dropped to 8 per cent from 19 per cent in 2017. New Brunswick — the province with the highest number of unfounded cases in 2017, saw the most significant change — from 32 per cent to 12 per cent. “I think what we’ve seen since “Unfounded” is a pretty profound culture shift in policing. Overall, what we’re seeing is a lot better, and they’re more open to collaboration. There was a level of humility that came out after the report,” Jenn Richard, the director of strategic development at Sexual Violence New Brunswick, told Doolittle.⁵⁷

Doolittle and editor-in-chief David Walmsley would be the only representatives of a media organization invited to the front during the ceremony to get the trophy and photo with Her Excellency. The other finalists would have to wait until after to get their certificates of merit and a group photo opportunity with Payette in a separate room. The biggest surprise, however, was that Her Excellency had not signed any of the certificates for the finalists and award winner, something that still rankles Walmsley. Payette showed surprise when this was brought to her attention. “I will take responsibility for everything. So if I didn’t sign a certificate, I’m really sorry. This is all I can say.”⁵⁸

Still, Payette set aside her *animus* and, as with other governors general, she did her duty, hosting a buffet dinner and drinks with music for the media. At the end of the evening, there was a sigh of relief among the directors of the Michener Foundation

In year two of Payette's tenure, Rideau Hall rolled out the red carpet. Taking a page from her predecessors, Michaëlle Jean's "Art Matters" interactive discussions and Adrienne Clarkson's cultural roundtable lunches, Payette hosted a panel discussion on journalism in Canada at Rideau Hall the afternoon of the ceremony. Carleton's Chris Waddell, Pierre-Paul Noreau, publisher of *Le Droit*, David Akin of *Global News* and Althia Raj of *HuffPost* held a wide-ranging conversation about the challenges of gathering, sharing and communicating facts in the age of "fake news" and misinformation.⁵⁹

That night her speech focused on ceremonies in France and Halifax to mark the seventy-fifth anniversary of D-Day, and Her Excellency spoke of the horrors of conflict. Turning to media, she said, that if we can learn anything from the two world wars, it is that "when democracy begins to die you often see that first is the death of the freedom of the press, when propaganda, disinformation, fake news will be able to turn the population around and provide people with false impressions, and then things change."⁶⁰

After her speech, the emcees read the citations for the finalists. One by one, the journalists went to the podium and talked about the difference their stories had made. In the Niagara Region, voters turfed councillors connected to shady hiring practices, evidence of "the power of local news," said Grant LaFleche of the *St. Catharines Standard*. In Kitchener, more than 300 rubber workers will have their health claims reviewed. In New Brunswick, revelations of a dysfunctional and dangerous ambulance service played a role in the defeat of a provincial government. CBC's *the fifth estate* unearthed hidden evidence supporting seatbelts on school buses. Stories about faulty medical implants led to a national ban on textured breast implants, with more reforms promised. In the North, the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN) exposed a link between child welfare and the high rate of suicides. In the Yukon, revelations of neglect and abuse in group homes for Aboriginal youth prompted a government apology, an investigation and policy changes. "This is what the Michener Award is all about, the betterment of the public,"⁶¹ said Mervin Brass, CBC North's managing editor.

The announcement of the 2018 Michener Award winner, the *Telegraph-Journal* for "Sounding the Alarm," an investigation into ambulance service

in New Brunswick, brought applause that was mixed with excitement, relief, disappointment and celebration. This was the first Michener for the *Telegraph-Journal*, and to some in the room, it came as a surprise. After all, Irving-owned Brunswick News Inc. did not have a reputation across Canada for its investigative journalism.

After editor Wendy Metcalfe and her team received the Michener trophy and the photos were taken, Metcalfe took the podium. “The work celebrated here tonight is a staunch reminder of just how much journalism matters. Without it, secrecy would be rampant. Truth, trust and transparency would be scant. Without journalism, systemic problems . . . would deepen. Wrongs would not be made right. . . . With journalism, in the darkness, there’s light, there’s change.”⁶² No one could imagine that this panel and ceremony on June 12, 2019, would be the last in-person gathering at Rideau Hall before the COVID-19 pandemic shut down the world.

The board of the Michener Foundation had spent the first year and a half of Payette’s tenure in a state of high anxiety. Survival dominated the agenda. Persistence and a little help from friends allowed the Foundation to hang on to the vital connection to Rideau Hall and secure the endorsement of the governor general. Survival was paramount to the Micheners’ public service mission. The award — a symbol of excellence — was needed more than ever to provide support and validation to an industry that was being battered on all sides — failing business models, digital disruption, harassment and a flood of mis- and disinformation.

New times, new ways, new threats

As Payette pointed out in her 2018 speech, the professional environment in which journalists did their work had profoundly changed. Truth-telling was being undermined and was under attack. The Michener Foundation saw an opportunity to revamp its flagging education fellowship to support journalists navigating difficult times. The board started to address the issue in 2017 but first had to work through governance changes and focus on building a relationship with Rideau Hall. It would take another four years and advice from a consortium of journalism schools for the Foundation to revamp its education fellowship.

A discussion paper presented in the spring of 2017 set out the problem. Digital disruption was the root cause of declining applications for the \$40,000 four-month fellowship. “Although journalism schools initially expressed

enthusiasm for the fellowship, it came at a time when the media industry and media education were facing enormous challenges due to the impact of digitalization. Because of cutbacks, media organizations were unable to release reporters for the length of time required and journalists themselves became reluctant to take time off, for fear of not being able to return to their places of employment. Journalism schools were facing similar cutbacks and lacked faculty and staff to administer the fellowships, while at the same time facing union and other regulations that made it difficult.⁶³ The report suggested a review of the education fellowship.

In the summer of 2017, a sub-committee turned its attention to the problem. Members included director James Deacon, son of the Foundation's first president, Paul Deacon, who had raised the money for the fellowships in the 1980s. In the interim report, committee chair Donna Logan, professor emerita of UBC's School of Journalism, outlined options, including the creation of a Visiting Journalist program. It would fund Michener finalists and award winners to travel to journalism schools to hold workshops and lectures. Logan's committee, in the politest way possible, "foresaw implementational challenges"⁶⁴ to the proposed program, namely, someone from the volunteer board would have to administer it. The idea, a great one, came at the wrong time. In 2017-18, the board was transitioning, and no one had the energy or time to champion the project. The Visiting Journalist program never got off the ground.

When applications for the education fellowship fell from a high of five in 2012 to one in 2018, the board made the tough decision to suspend it for a year. The Michener board asked journalism educators associated with J-Schools Canada/*ÉcolesJ*, a consortium of post-secondary journalism schools across the country, to recommend a model and criteria that would benefit students and the industry. The board looked to the consortium to provide a framework to meet current issues.

What emerged in 2020 was a newly funded fellowship that reflected emerging trends and challenges in journalism. The revised criteria allowed applications from journalistic teams of up to four — including journalism schools and media organizations — who had support from a journalism educator and an experienced journalist. The proposal had to focus on a project that would "expand the knowledge of newsroom products, processes and practices."⁶⁵

The name was changed to the L. Richard O'Hagan Fellowship for Journalism Education: named after "Dick" O'Hagan. and funded by BMO

Financial Group with a \$100,000 commitment over four years.⁶⁶ O’Hagan had been a senior executive with the bank and had started his career as a reporter with the *Toronto Telegram* before moving into public relations. Over the years, he had served as Special Advisor to Prime Ministers Lester B. Pearson and Pierre Trudeau before taking a vice-president position at BMO. The revised fellowship would open the door to innovative solutions-based projects to support journalists transitioning to an increasingly hostile digital world. It was a world where fact-based journalism competed with fabricated information. It had become a nasty world where journalists — especially female and racialized reporters — faced harassment, hate and threats in the field and online from citizens and those in positions of authority.

The first O’Hagan fellowship was awarded in 2020 to a consortium led by the national journalism portal, *J-Source* to create the “Canada Press Freedom Project,” a database to track attacks against journalists and instances of online hate and threats against journalists.⁶⁷ The idea for the hub was inspired by the U.S. Press Freedom Tracker.⁶⁸ When the project was conceived, no one could have predicted the escalation of violations against press freedom in Canada or the daily intimidation, harassment and threats faced by journalists reporting in the field, especially online.

As the isolation and shifting public health directives during the COVID-19 pandemic intensified, so did the vitriol in Canada. People felt empowered to attack not only the actions of provincial and federal governments but also the message of journalists covering the story. Threats — in person and online — from protestors at the so-called “freedom convoy,” especially in downtown Ottawa in the winter of 2022, were serious enough for some journalists to cover the protest with a security guard at their side. Journalists found themselves increasingly in unsafe workplaces. They faced insults, threats and intimidation. They found their vehicles damaged and had to keep a tight grip on their equipment to keep it from being knocked from their hands. This was a new world. It did not end there. When journalists went online, especially if they were female or racialized, they found themselves navigating tidal waves of hate, insults and even death threats in their email and social media accounts.

Journalists also faced resistance from those in authority. Police set up “exclusion zones” at protest sites in isolated areas under the pretense of court injunctions to keep journalists at a distance. In 2021, RCMP arrested journalists trying to cover protests against a gas pipeline in Wetsuwet’en territory in central British Columbia and at Fairy Creek on Vancouver Island, the site

of an old-growth logging protest. This increasing resistance from police and other authorities added yet another challenge to the work of journalists, a factor which projects undertaken through the Michener fellowships sought to address.

The home page of the Canada Press Freedom Project's website documents more than a hundred instances since 2021 where Canadian media workers have faced arrests or criminal charges, been denied access, had their equipment seized or damaged, faced intimidation, harassment or attacked in person and online. Journalists with the Press Freedom Project verify each report before posting it on the website. The site's searchable database gives a public face to instances of hate, abuse, harassment and other assaults on freedom of the press. In addition, the website offers resources to help journalists cope with a changing work environment. The seed money of \$40,000 from the Michener Awards Foundation was crucial to develop this website.

The escalating verbal and physical abuse that journalists navigate has its roots in growing divisiveness in society as 'alternative facts' are presented and defended as truth against fact-based journalism.⁶⁹ To help fight the erosion of trust in the media in a post-truth era, the 2021 Michener - L. Richard O'Hagan Fellowship for Journalism Education funded two journalists to create the Truth in Journalism Fact-Checking Guide, a timely online resource to help educators and students⁷⁰

Allison Baker, the head of research at *Walrus* magazine, and Viviane Fairbank, a journalist and philosopher now based in Scotland, consulted widely with working journalists, editors, authors and educators "about the most pressing challenges — and possible solutions — regarding gathering and verifying journalistic facts."⁷¹ In 2022, Baker and Fairbank launched the "new guidelines for editorial fact-checking that are rigorous, inclusive, and informed by interdisciplinary expertise."⁷²

These Michener-funded projects are part of a larger effort in Canada to rebuild trust in media under the long-held belief that strong independent journalism is essential to the health of democratic institutions. Media companies such as the *Globe and Mail*, *Toronto Star*, CTV Edmonton and CBC Radio are taking the initiative to educate citizens. As members of the Trust Project, these media outlets have agreed to follow prescribed international standards and protocols such as "transparent ownership and mission statements, ethics and reporting policies, clear labelling of story types, and links to detailed author information."⁷³ Think tanks such as the Public Policy

Forum,⁷⁴ *Centre d'études sur les médias*⁷⁵ at Laval University and the Centre for Media, Technology and Democracy⁷⁶ at McGill University conduct research into policy and other alternatives. All these actions are ways to counter mis- and disinformation and strengthen the media environment.

The Michener fellowships are a small part of this mix. Between 1987 and 2023, the Michener Award Foundation has supported fifty-eight working journalists for study leaves, education initiatives with journalism schools and investigative journalism projects. Journalists like Robb Cribb and Matthew Pearson have taken the initial idea of a “sabbatical” or “study break” for mid-career journalists to new levels. “The Press Freedom Project and Truth in Journalism Fact-Checking Guide” have made education resources widely accessible to meet the changes in the industry. These Michener-funded projects, along with the investigative fellowship, helped to build a culture of public service in journalism in newsrooms, which has survived technological disruption, economic collapse, the crumbling of business models and the emergence of new media.

